Center on Irregular Warfare and Armed Groups

Organizational Learning and the Marine Corps: The Counterinsurgency Campaign in Iraq

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Message from the Editors

In 2008, the Naval War College established the Center on Irregular Warfare & Armed Groups (CIWAG). CIWAG's primary mission is twofold: first, to bring cutting edge research on Irregular Warfare into the Joint Professional Military Educational (JPME) curricula; and second, to bring operators, practitioners, and scholars together to share their knowledge and experiences about a vast array of violent and non-violent irregular challenges. This case study is part of an ongoing effort at CIWAG that includes symposia, lectures by world-renowned academics, case studies, research papers, articles and books. Our aim is to make these case studies part of an evolving and adaptive curriculum that fulfills the needs of students preparing to meet the challenges of the post-9/11 world.

Dr. Richard Shultz is the author of this case study, which examines how the Marine Corps was able to learn from and adapt to conditions on the ground in Anbar province from 2006–2008, developing a three-dimensional strategy that resulted in stability from previous chaos and overwhelming violence. The author views this success through the lens of organizational theory, discussing the barriers to change in military organizations and the characteristics of organizations that are able to learn. The Marines' focus on learning, adaptability, and institutional memory are seen as keys to their success in Anbar. Ten lessons are drawn from this case that relate to the future irregular conflict environment and to the efficacy of counterinsurgency, engagement, and counterterrorism as instruments for managing these future challenges for both US military and civilian security institutions.

It is also important to note three critical caveats to this case study. First, the opinions found in this case study are solely those of the author and do not represent the views of the Department of Defense, the Naval War College or CIWAG. Second, while every effort has been made to correct any factual errors in this work, the author is ultimately responsible for the content of this case study. Third, the study questions presented in all CIWAG case studies are written to provoke discussion on a wide variety of topics including strategic, operational, and tactical

matters as well as ethical and moral questions confronted by operators in the battlefield. The point is to make these case studies part of an evolving and adaptive curriculum that fulfills the needs of students preparing to meet the challenges of the post-9/11 world and to show them the dilemmas that real people faced in high-pressure situations.

Finally, in addition to a range of teaching questions that are intended to serve as the foundation for classroom discussion, students conducting research on Iraq and Anbar Province will probably find the extensive bibliography at the end of the case helpful. Compiled by the case study author, the bibliography is a selection of the best books and articles on a range of related topics. We hope you find it useful and look forward to hearing your feedback on the cases and suggestions for how you can contribute to the Center on Irregular Warfare & Armed Group's mission here at the Naval War College.

Author Biography

Dr. Richard H. Shultz, Jr., is a professor of international politics at the Fletcher School, Tufts University, where he teaches graduate-level courses in various aspects of international security affairs, internal/transnational conflict, war studies, and intelligence and armed groups. He is also the director of the Fletcher School's International Security Studies Program. He has held three chairs: the Olin Distinguished Professorship of National Security Studies at the U.S. Military Academy, Secretary of the Navy Senior Research Fellow at the U.S. Naval War College, and Brigadier General H. L. Oppenheimer Chair of War-fighting Strategy, U.S. Marine Corps. His forthcoming book, *The Marines Take Anbar: The Four-Year Fight against al Qaeda*, will be published in early spring 2013 by the Naval Institute Press. Other recent books include *Insurgents, Terrorists, and Militias: The Warriors of Contemporary Combat* (Columbia University Press, 2006) and *The Secret War Against Hanoi: Kennedy's and Johnson's Use of Spies, Saboteurs, and Covert Warriors in North Vietnam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999). Since the mid-1980s he has served as a security consultant to various U.S. government departments and agencies concerned with national security affairs. Currently he is a consultant to the U.S. Special Operations Command.

Suggested citation:

Shultz, Richard. 2012. *Organizational learning and the Marine Corps: The counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq.* CIWAG case study series 2011-2012, ed. Marc Genest and Andrea Dew. Newport, RI: US Naval War College, Center on Irregular Warfare and Armed Groups.

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List of Acronyms and Terms

AO – operational area
AQ – al Qaeda
AQI – al Qaeda in Iraq
BCT – Brigade Combat Team
COIN – counterinsurgency
COP – combat outpost
CPA – Coalition Provisional Authority
CSSE – Combat Service Support Element
DDR – disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration
GFE – Ground Force Element
IA – Iraqi Army
IAI – Islamic Army of Iraq
I MEF – 1st Marine Expeditionary Force
II MEF – 2nd Marine Expeditionary Force
ISF – Iraqi Security Forces
JOC – Joint Operations Center
JSOC – Joint Special Operations Command
LOC – lines of communications
OHRA – Office of Humanitarian and Reconstruction Assistance
OPLAN – operational plan
RCT – Regimental Combat Team
RIP – relief in place
SASO – security and stability operations
SITREP – situation report
XO – executive officer

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I. Introduction

A SITREP—situation report—for Anbar province as 2006 devolved from the spring into the summer months would have had the following bleak bottom line: *surging violence and grim prognoses.* That was the overwhelming conventional wisdom. Enemy violence was skyrocketing, while almost every prediction for any U.S. success in Anbar was plummeting.

This was even true for the chief of Marine intelligence in Anbar. Consider the devastating assessment in the late summer of that year completed by Col. Pete Devlin, the G-2 of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF). When his conclusions hit the front page of the *Washington Post* in September—"Situation Called Dire in West Iraq"—they rocked the White House.

Here is the opening salvo from that account: "The chief of intelligence for the Marine Corps in Iraq recently filed a secret report concluding that the prospects for securing … Anbar province are dim and there is almost nothing the U.S. military can do." Tom Ricks, who wrote the story, went on to note that one official familiar with the report said it "describes Anbar as beyond repair." Another said "it concludes that the United States has lost in Anbar."[1]

Then in November, Devlin produced an update. It "said much of the same things" as its August antecedent.[2] Statistics don't lie, goes the old adage. And the G-2 could cite the growing number of violent attacks to support his position. They all pointed in the same direction.

In these grim assessments of Anbar in 2006, ground zero was the city of Ramadi. Marines and soldiers who served in Anbar often referred to Ramadi as "al Qaedastan," and with good reason. The city experienced a higher rate of weekly attacks than anywhere else in Iraq. Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) controlled all of Ramadi except for the

[1] Thomas Ricks, "Situation Called Dire in West Iraq," *Washington Post*, September 11, 2006

[2] Col. Peter Devlin, oral history interview conducted by Kurtis Wheeler for the U.S. Marine Corps History Division, January 31, 2007, transcript, 9.

embattled Government Center, which was held by a company of Marines.

On the mean streets of the capital, AQI ruled mercilessly. Tales of their cruelties were endless. And they enforced a forbidding and puritanical code of behavior on the local populace. Men could not shave. Girls could not go to school. Music was forbidden. Beauty parlors were closed. Get caught smoking and you could lose your fingers.

The situation in fall 2006 looked hopeless. But on September 6, 2007, an event occurred in Ramadi that would have been beyond the wildest of imaginations a year earlier. The mayor of the capital gave the signal for the start of what had been up to 2002 the city's annual 5K race. Runners were going to compete once more on a course that runs through the winding streets of Ramadi, ending at the Government Center. In less than 12 months, Ramadi had been transformed from the most dangerous city in Iraq to one safe enough for its city fathers to sponsor a 5K race!

How did such a transformation take place? This remarkable turn of events came about because of the course of action initiated by I MEF as it took over Anbar in the spring of 2006. It changed the concept of operations for the fight against the insurgency. In 2007, the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Force (II MEF) built on and expanded what I MEF initiated.

And by the time I MEF returned in to Anbar in early 2008 for its third round in the Sunni heartland, things had dramatically changed, recalled its commander, Maj. Gen. John Kelly. The province was remarkably different from the one he left after his initial deployment in 2004 as the assistant commander of the 1st Marine Division. At that time, the division found itself in a rapidly escalating and bloody fight. Kelly recalled that when he left Iraq in early 2005 "there were roughly 400 violent events a week in Anbar." But "when I returned in February 2008 that number was down to 50 attacks per week."[3]

[3] Maj. Gen. John Kelly, presentation at Fletcher School (Tufts University) roundtable, "Marine Generals Discuss Anbar 2006," May 2, 2010, http://www.fletcher.tufts.edu/issp/Video.shtml.

By the end of 2008, Kelly asserted that Anbar had advanced well into the post-conflict phase to normalcy. Violent actions "were down to eight or nine a week." And that number "held for the last five, six months" of the year: "AQI had to commute into Anbar to blow something up … If they tried to stay in a city the people very quickly would identify them." That told the general it was now "appropriate to use the term *victory* in Anbar."[4]

Victory in Anbar! How did the Marines do it? And how were they able to do so a year before the success of the Surge and the counterinsurgency strategy upon which it was based? When I MEF first deployed to Anbar in March 2004, its campaign plan bore little resemblance to the conflict in which it soon found itself embroiled. By the end of that year, the fight settled into a deadly and protracted business as the insurgency burgeoned. And, as noted above, by the fall of 2006 many had given up on Anbar.

And still the Marines prevailed. What allowed them to do so? Why were they able to learn and adapt? And how should we understand the different elements of the three-dimensional strategy they employed there, which was an outgrowth of Marine learning and adapting? To answer these questions we will employ a diagnostic construct drawn from the literature on organizational learning. Propositions and concepts found in those texts provide analytic tools that can help decipher and comprehend the outcome in Anbar.

A. How Organizations Learn

The texts on organizational learning and change are dominated by the business and management disciplines.[5] There also is a segment of the literature in security studies that addresses the related subjects of

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Among the most often cited are ones by Chris Argyris and Peter Senge, as well as the classic studies of James March. See, for example, Argyris, *On Organizational Learning* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999); Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990); and March, *Decisions and Organizations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) and *Organizations*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

military learning[6] and innovation.[7] A common theme running through these studies is the axiom that learning, innovation, and change comes hard to large organizations in general, and to military ones in particular.

Roadblocks to Change

What are the barriers that make change in military organizations problematical? In a recent study, *Lifting the Fog of Peace*, Janine Davidson identified three prevailing explanations of why adapting and innovating is so difficult.[8] The first two are drawn from organizational and bureaucratic theory.[9] Those utilizing organizational theory to assess military institutions find innate rigidity and strong resistance to change. This is attributed to the formalized norms, standard operating procedures, and routine ways that large organizations do things. Those processes often serve as barriers to change. They throw up Chinese walls that constitute acute obstructions, seriously hindering adaptation.[10]

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[6] See Richard Downie, *Learning From Conflict: The U.S. Military in Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Drug War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998); John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Janine Davidson, *Lifting the Fog of Peace* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010); and Gordon Sullivan and Michael Harper, *Hope is Not a Method: What Business Leaders Can Learn from America's Army* (New York: Random House, 1996).

[7] See Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Stephen Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Deborah Avant, "The Institutional Sources of Military Doctrine: Hegemons in Peripheral Wars," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (December 1993) and Elizabeth Kier, *Imagining War: French and British Military Doctrine between the Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997)

[8] Davidson summarizes the organizational theory explanation as follows: "in this model, even when actors within a military organization desire a change in strategy or doctrine, structural mechanisms would likely mitigate against it." Davidson, *Lifting the Fog of Peace*, Chpt. 1.

[9] These have their origins in Graham Allison's classic study of decision making and his utilization of the texts on organizational behavior to explain the Cuban missile crisis: Graham Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1999).

[10] Davidson, *Lifting the Fog of Peace*, p. 11.

Bureaucratic politics specialists find yet other impediments to change. Davidson notes that "military leaders, like the leaders of other large organizations, seek to promote the importance of their organization and to preserve the organization's distinct organization essence" or central mission. Challenges to that central mission are likely to be resisted unless the leadership comes to see that change will "enhance the importance and influence of the organization."[11] More Chinese walls!

Finally, there are the constraints imposed by organizational culture. Specialists on the topic like Richard Downie find that institutional memory and history, key factors that shape organizational culture, frequently impede the organization's capacity to innovate and change. "When the norms, SOPs, and doctrines" of an organization "become widely accepted and practiced" they will "form … the organization's institutional memory." That memory is then socialized into its members, making the organization "normally resistant to change."[12] Yet more Chinese walls!

In spite of these impediments, large organizations can learn and change. Davidson finds that militaries "change in response to three catalysts: (1) external pressure, (2) the opportunity or need to grow and/or survive, and (3) failure."[13] But innovation does not "happen easily or automatically" because "militaries tie their cultural identities to specific roles or have career structures that fail to reward (or even punish) new ways of thinking."[14]

In Anbar, the Marine Corps bucked these impediments to adapt and change. To understand why they were able adapt and employ a three-dimensional strategy that included the "clear, hold, build" phases of counterinsurgency, tribal engagement to solidify local security, and counterterrorism operations to attack the insurgent's secret

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 13. Also see Anthony Downs, *Inside Bureaucracy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967) and James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).
[12] Downie, *Learning From Conflict: The U.S. Military in Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Drug War*, p. 23-24.
[13] Davidson, *Lifting the Fog of Peace*, p. 12.
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 18-19.

underground network, a brief discussion of the tenets of organizational learning is necessary.

The Learning Process

Many definitions of organizational learning can be found in business and management texts. But for our purposes it is Richard Downie's that is best suited for assessing the Marine campaign in Anbar. An organization demonstrates an aptitude to learn, he proposes, when it "uses new knowledge or understanding gained from experience to adjust institutional norms, doctrine, and procedures in ways designed to minimize gaps in performance and maximize future successes."[15] This description captures the essence of what it means to be a learning organization.

Barbara Levitt and James March magnify what Downie proposes. They describe organizational learning as "routine-based, history-dependent, and target-oriented. Organizations are seen as [demonstrating] learning by encoding inferences from history into routines that guide behavior." Where do those inferences come from? Learning organizations draw them from "direct experience" and from "the experience of others." Having done so, they "develop conceptual frameworks or paradigms for interpreting that experience" and turning it into a usable guide for future action by encoding and storing it in the organization's memory.[16]

These two definitions serve as the starting point for assessing why an organization does or does not learn. Institutional learning

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[15] Downie, *Learning From Conflict: The U.S. Military in Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Drug War*, p. 22.

[16] Barbara Levitt and James March, "Organizational Learning," *Annual Review of Sociology* (1988), p. 319. Since it was published, it has come to be considered one of the seminal works on organizational learning. According to one assessment, it "has been cited more than 3,000 times in a wide variety of other literatures and by essentially every subsequent article seeking to build or contribute to the literature on learning. The paper makes a major theoretical contribution by re-framing a large subset of the broader literature on organizations in terms of organizational learning in ways that provide a synthetic foundation for further work."
http://acawiki.org/Organizational_learning.

theory, Downie explains, describes "the systemic process by which organizations either learn and change their doctrine, norms, or standard procedures to act on that learning or disregard the information and retain their doctrine, norms, and standard operating procedures."[17]

This systemic process is illustrated by learning theorists through models depicting a cyclical course of action that involves several steps. The illustration in Figure 1 was developed by Downie to study U.S. Army doctrinal change.[18]

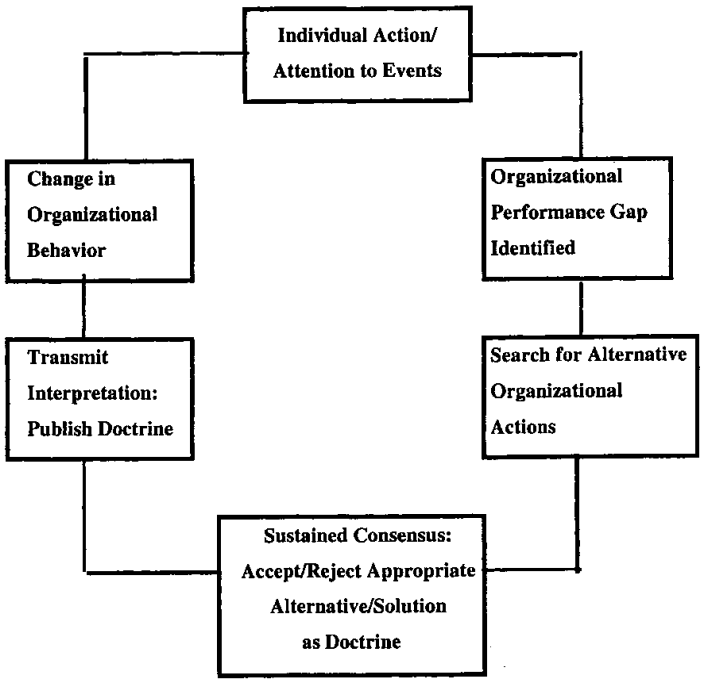

Figure 1: The Institutional Learning Cycle

Downie's model outlines the steps in the process through which learning and adaptation is possible. It begins with members of the organization recognizing that there are performance gaps that can

[17] Downie, *Learning From Conflict: The U.S. Military in Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Drug War*, p. 34.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 38.

only be redressed through adaptation and change. To do so, the organization has to acquire and process information in order to pinpoint alternatives.[19] Based on these developments, the "organization assesses and interprets the discoveries or evaluations made by individual members, and if deemed valid through consensus, explores options to resolve the anomalous situation." Resolution of those anomalies will take the form of actions that "adapt organizational behavior" through changes in organizational "norms, doctrine, or SOPs."[20]

The cyclical process just described outlines the steps by which an organization can learn and adapt. But what the learning literature tells us is that the real world contains many factors that undermine this prototype in various ways. And many of those factors have their origins in the nature and structure of the organization itself. Nevertheless, it is possible to deduce from that literature the characteristics or attributes that, if present in an organization, can facilitate learning, adaptation, and change.

Characteristics of Learning Organizations

Organizations that successfully navigate the learning cycle illustrated above to successfully address performance gaps have the following six characteristics.

First, they place a high premium on adaptation and change. These are key organizational norms—core competences—and not just platitudes. They are a part of the organization's foundation and disposition, and serve as a prescribed way of thinking and acting. According to Peter Senge, this becomes part of the personality of the organization.[21]

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[19] Davidson notes that "some organizations actively promote the collection and dissemination of new information, while others rigidly adhere to standard operating procedures and ignore new information—especially if that information challenges existing paradigms and norms." *Lifting the Fog of Peace*, p. 19-20

[20] Downie, *Learning From Conflict: The U.S. Military in Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Drug War*, p. 34-35.

[21] Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization.*

Second, a proficiency to innovate, improvise, and respond to the unexpected is socialized into the members of the organization. Members learn roles, methods, and modes of behavior that prepare them to respond to unexpected and unforeseen challenges. Nagl believes that military organizations can be prepared in this manner. He found that this was true for the British army during the colonial period. It was structured "precisely to deal with the unexpected" and was "actively expected to innovate."[22]

Third, organizations that are able to manage uncertainty are equipped with "tools … to make sense of the situations they face."[23] These include, explains Senge, the capacity to acquire and analyze the necessary information and knowledge in order to make adjustments to the mission.[24]

Fourth, the acquisition of information and knowledge initially comes from direct experience. March and Levitt call this "learning by doing." A second source is through study. Davidson terms the combination of these two methods "experiential learning": "hands-on activities" and "intellectual reflection (reading, listening, and thinking)." A third method is that of understanding gained through an organization's informal networks, where the voluntary sharing of "ideas and solutions" takes place.[25]

Fifth, routines capture these learning experiences over time and embed them into the organization through socialization, education, and professionalization. March and Levitt explain that organizations do so by "encoding inferences … into routines that guide behavior." Routines include the "rules, procedures, conventions, strategies, and technologies around which organizations are constructed and through which they operate."[26]

Sixth, memory is likewise a key institutional characteristic of a learning organization. Lessons from past experiences are codified into

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[22] Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, p. 220-21.
[23] Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, p. 5.
[24] *Ibid.*
[25] Davidson, *Lifting the Fog of Peace*, p. 25-26.
[26] Levitt and James March, "Organizational Learning," p. 320.

memory, which can be consulted, retrieved, and utilized. They become not just "standards of good professional practice" but a "shared perceptions of the way things are done around here."[27]

B. Anbar Case Study

The characteristics of a learning organization provide a diagnostic construct through which to assess how the Marine Corps was able to adapt and succeed in Anbar. All military institutions are steeped in tradition and develop idiosyncratic cultures that shape the way they operate. This is true of the Marine Corps. And a mainstay among Corps tradition is the premium placed on learning and adapting as a core competency.

In *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps*, Victor Krulak underscored this commitment to learning and adapting. He did so through a number of historical examples that run the gambit from imaginative changes in strategy and operational concepts to the development of inventive weaponry and equipment. What stands out in each vignette is learning and adapting.[28] Krulak identifies several attributes "that constitute the identity of the Marine Corps."[29] Three of these include the capacity to think and reflect, to innovate, and to improvise, all of which correlate with organizational learning.

Moreover, because Marines expect to be first in the fight, Krulak explains, they assume they will find themselves initially engaged without a clear understanding of the context or the enemy. The "war you prepare for," writes Krulak, "is rarely the war you get."[30] As a result, Marines learn roles, methods, and modes of behavior to respond to situations marked by ambiguity, uncertainty, and unforeseen challenges.

This approach is infused into training and professional education. James Warren observes in his USMC combat history how, beginning at the Basic School for officers, "training exercises" foster

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[27] *Ibid.*
[28] Victor Krulak, *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps* (Annnapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1999).
[2929] *Ibid.* See parts I-III.
[30] *Ibid.*, p. 137.

"adaptability, boldness, and self-criticism."[31] And through formal and informal study of their history, Marines learn that these core principles have served them well. The Marine Corps is "history-dependent," which is consistent with March and Levitt's observation that a key part of learning involves "encoding inferences from history into routines that guide behavior."[32]

In sum, the Marine Corps appears to have an organizational culture that underscores learning and embeds lessons from its history into the Corps memory. That history is rife with examples of at first being caught in the fog of war—but then, having learned from knowledge gained in the fight, being flexible enough to make adjustments, overcome gaps in performance, and be successful.

The narrative that follows seeks to explain how the Marine Corps was able to successfully adapt and change in Anbar by tracing the process through which their campaign unfolded between 2004 and 2008. The study will highlight key junctures where learning and adapting took place and change followed. It finds that the organizational culture of the Marine Corps, and its attention to the tenets of learning outlined above, played an important role in the Anbar campaign. The case study will be divided into the following parts:

- Part two describes the background and contest to the conflict. It begins with an overview of Anbar, highlighting its cultural, social and political identity. This is followed by a chronicling of the policy mistakes the U.S. made in 2003 in Iraq and how those missteps set the conditions for the fight between the insurgents and the Marines.
- Part three provides profiles of the actors involved in the conflict. It begins with the armed groups that made up the insurgent coalition that emerged in Anbar in 2003–2004. Who were they, and what were their aims and goals? How were they organized, and how did they operate? What were the differences between the insurgent factions? Next is described the composition

[31] James Warren, *American Spartans* (New York: Free Press, 2005), p. 20.
[32] Levitt and James March, "Organizational Learning," p. 319.

of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF) and how it prepared for its initial deployment to Anbar in the spring of 2004 and the fight that ensued during that year.

- Parts four to six present an operational-level analysis of the Marine campaign in Anbar. That fight with the insurgents is assessed through the analytic lens of organizational learning and adaptation. A systematic examination of the changes in the strategies executed by the different MEFs over the four years period is untaken. The goal is to bring to light how the Marines learned and adapted and ultimately prevailed in the midst of a brutal irregular war that they did not initially understand, and how they brought together a three-dimensional strategy to do so. That strategy, which consisted of the counterinsurgency phases of "clear, hold, build," tribal engagement to expand the operating force available to the MEFs to ensure local security, and targeted counterterrorism aimed at degrading al Qaeda's clandestine apparatus, were all critical to their success.

Other scholars have argued that success in Anbar was due to only one or two of these dimensions. For example, Lindsey and Petersen stress the role of tribal mobilization and write that Marine learning in Anbar "proceeded through trial and error in the absence of standardized COIN doctrine."[33] They are referring to the fact that I MEF was well on its way to degrading AQI in Anbar before *FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency*, which served as the strategic basis for the Surge, was finalized and officially released in December 2006. But as will be seen in this narrative, I MEF's 2006 campaign plan was based on the long-standing COIN precepts of "clear, hold, and build." They did not need *FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency* to tell them about it. Those precepts were well understood by I MEF, but they had to be contextualized in their

[33] Jon Lindsay and Roger Petersen, "Varieties of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq, 2003-2009." Case study prepared for the Naval War College Center for Irregular Warfare and Armed Groups (September 2011), p. 60

campaign plan for Anbar. And that entailed tribal engagement and coordination with the counterterrorism units of Task Force 145.

- Part seven offers closing reflections, drawn from the narrative. They are presented as informed observations taken from the Anbar campaign that relate to the future conflict environment, the nature of armed groups, and the efficacy of counterinsurgency as a strategy for managing those challenges.

II. Background and Context

To fight successfully in the irregular warfare setting of Iraq's Al Anbar province, Marines needed a cultural understanding of the local population, how they perceived and thought about their world, and the ways in which they organized social and political relations to survive in it. But the Marines deploying to Anbar in March 2004 were not equipped with such an appreciation.

However, over the next four years they were able to gain an on-the-job understanding of Anbar and to put it to good use. In order to appreciate what they learned to turn the situation around, it is necessary to become familiar with the cultural values, social and political groupings, and worldview of the people who live there—the Iraqi Sunni Arabs. Their persona, which the Marines had to come to understand and engage, is based on "ethnicity and language, religion, tribal roots and membership, and historical experience."[34]

A. Anbar Narrative

Located in central Iraq, Anbar province is the largest of Iraq's 18 governorates. No one really knows how many people reside there. Today, the estimates hover around two to three million. The population is concentrated in seven of Anbar's eight districts: Abu Graib, Fallujah,

[34] Lin Todd et al., *Iraq Tribal Study—Al-Anbar Governorate: The Albu Fahd Tribe, the Albu Mahal Tribe and the Albu Issa Tribe* (Alexandria, VA: Quantum Research International, 2006), ES-1.

Ramadi, Hit, Haditha, Anah, and Al-Qa'im. Within these territories, the majority of the residents live in the cities and towns that dot the Euphrates River.

To operate in Anbar, one must come to know the longstanding beliefs and values that unite the Sunni Arabs that live there, shaping the worldview through which they interpret events and take actions. Those beliefs and values are derived from three sources: Bedouin tribal traditions, Islam, and Arab culture.[35] Awareness of these elements of identity and how they interact with each other and the worldview they foster is the starting point for engagement in Al Anbar.

Bedouin Traditions, Islamic Principles, and Arab Culture

Starting in the 1960s, social scientists predicted that tribes and clans found in traditional societies were passing from the world scene in the wake of modernity.[36] Evidently, the tribes in Anbar did not get the word, because when the U.S. intervened in 2003 they were still around, operating on principles of behavior that lie deep in their Bedouin roots. Anbar's Dulaymi tribal confederation's communal rules and ethos are illustrative. Solidarity, loyalty, and honor are keystones of their tribal value system.

These values took root long ago and shaped a code of behavior that remains embedded in the character of present-day Anbar tribes. Indeed, the modern-day adherents of these precepts often follow rather

[35] "Each of these sources of identity, in conjunction with historical experiences, has created for the Sunni Arab population of Al Anbar the following self-perception: [They] feel that they are part of a community that shares a set of similar characteristics, values and experiences … [They] are proud of their religious and political history. They tend to regard themselves as the descendents and heirs to a long and great history of intellectual development, wealth, and political rule over the massive Islamic empire. They regard themselves as a group apart from other ethnic and religious groups, who they see as less worthy of political power and cultural-religious legitimacy." *Ibid.*, chap. 2, p. 3.

[36] For a discussion of this, see Richard Shultz and Andrea Dew, *Insurgents, Terrorists, and Militias: The Warriors of Contemporary Combat* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), chap. 3.

exacting conventions that creates a deep sense of responsibility to the tribe.

For example, bringing to justice anyone who violates individual or group honor is central to this ethos. Revenge, blood feuds, and even war can serve as the means for addressing such transgressions. Often, revenge is formally prescribed as the duty of all of the tribes' male members.[37] Nonviolent means can also be employed to settle disputes. Among other Bedouin traditions maintained by the tribes of Anbar is respect for martial feats, military achievement, and a readiness to resort to the use of force.[38]

Islam likewise has had a major influence on Anbar's tribes. To understand the Islamic element of the tribes' identity, the Marines deploying in 2004 needed to drill down. What they would have found is that no one interpretation of Sunni Islam exists. Rather, most Sunnis subscribe to one of four main schools of thought—Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanbali, and Hanafi—and knowing which one predominates in Anbar is crucial.

The differences among these four perspectives turn on how stringently Islamic principles are interpreted and practiced. The strictest is the Hanbali school, established in the ninth century. Its popularity has fluctuated since its founding. In modern times it reemerged, first in the nineteenth century with the Wahhabis and then in the twentieth century in the guise of the Salafi Islamic revival.

The Salafi movement is made up of Sunni Muslims drawn mainly from the Hanbali school. Many of the most puritanical groups found in the Muslim world are Salafis. It is important to note that the vast majority are nonviolent. While they believe in a strict adherence to the Quran and the Sunna, they do not advocate the use of violence against those who do not accept their beliefs.[39] However, some Salafists do, and today they include al Qaeda and its associated movements.

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[37] For a detailed discussion, see Joseph Ginat, *Blood Revenge: Family Honor, Mediation, and Outcasting* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 1997).

[38] John Jandora, *Militarism in Arab Society: An Historical and Bibliographical Sourcebook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), xxii.

[39] For a detailed assessment of the Salafi movement and its different factions, see Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in*

The tribes that make up the Dulaymi confederation in Anbar are not Hanbalis or their Salafi offshoot. Rather, they are largely Hanifas, the most liberal of the four schools.[40] Generally known to be more moderate in their Islamic orientation, Hanafis are considered the school most receptive to modern ideas. Such an understanding had operational significance to Marines deploying to Anbar in 2004.

Finally, Arab culture is the third element of the identity puzzle that shapes the worldview of the inhabitants of Anbar. The identity of Iraq's Sunni Arabs is deeply influenced by the narrative of modern Arab ethno-nationalism. They had lived for centuries under Ottoman domination and, following World War I, within a British-imposed state legitimized by the League of Nations.

The state that finally emerged in Iraq in 1932 was dominated by Arab Sunni elites. The details of this will not be recounted here. We need only note that from that time until 2003, the Sunnis ruled the Iraqi state based on an identity that featured modern Arab nationalist themes that included a fierce sense of independence and resistance to outside interference.

These three enduring elements of identity—Bedouin tribal traditions, Islam, and Arab culture—have each reinforced a self-perception of Anbar's Sunni tribes as an elite community, superior to Iraq's other ethnic and religious groups. And that self-perception was

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Conflict & Terrorism, no. 3 (2006):207–39. The author divides Salafis into three major Salafi factions: purists, politicos, and jihadis. In the article he explains the sources of unity among these factions, as well as those factors that separate them. The latter center on issues related to politics and violence. He notes that "although Salafis share a common religious creed, they differ over their assessment of contemporary problems and thus how this creed should be applied."

[40] See Colin Turner, *Islam: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2006); John Alden Williams, *The Word of Islam* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994); Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam: An Introduction* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992); John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); John L. Esposito, ed., *The Oxford History of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Ira Marvin Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

reinforced by the fact that Sunnis dominated Iraq's social and political order before and during the decades of Ba'athist rule.

Consequently, it should have come as no surprise that a sudden loss of that status could translate into armed resistance if actions were not taken to forestall it. Deciphering these elements of identity, how they interact with each other, the beliefs and perceptions they generate, and the rules of behavior they foster was the starting point for Marines deploying to Anbar in March 2004.

Social Organization and Political Power

In the Middle East of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, imperial powers and indigenous strongmen regularly sought to consolidate state power. Equally often they encountered stiff tribal resistance to their centralizing schemes. The ability of tribes to resist depended on the strength of their own solidarity, the political landscape of the day, the power of occupiers or national authorities, and the harshness of the times.

Within this context, tribal defiance constituted a longstanding feature of the Iraqi landscape. More often than not, tribes turned back assaults on their autonomy, as even Saddam and his Ba'athist cronies found out.[41] After seizing power, they immediately denigrated "sheikhs and tribalism … as the epitome of backwardness." Both stood in the way of "building a new society" and "creating a [new] Arab man." Sheikhs were gunned down or jailed, and tens of thousands of tribal people were forced to relocate to cities. Using tribal names was forbidden.[42]

In spite of these brutal measures, tribalism remained the core around which local Iraqi society revolved. Out of necessity, Saddam not only had to accept that reality but also depend on it to survive two disastrous wars of his own making. From the Sunni Triangle he

[41] For a detailed discussion on this, see Philip Khoury and Joeseph Kostiner, *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East* (Berkely, CA: University of California Press, 1990).

[42] Amatzia Baram, "Neo-Tribalism in Iraq," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29, no. 1, (February 1997): 1–31.

recruited men to fill the leadership ranks of the Republican Guards, the Special Republican Guards, and the various other intelligence and security units. And the tribes of the Dulaymi confederation of Anbar provided more than their share, which brought many advantages. However, gaining status had its downside, for Saddam automatically saw the confederation as posing a threat. Living in constant fear of losing control to the same kind of cabal he had helped orchestrate in the past, Saddam inflicted periodic bloodlettings on the Dulaymis to prevent such subterfuge, whether real or imagined.

While Operation Iraqi Freedom swept Saddam from power, it did not alter the social context in Anbar. Sunni tribes and sheikhs retained their local authority, power, and guns. Their militias remained intact and were strengthened by returning cashiered Iraqi Army vets. The tribe remained the principal social organization and source of political power.

Consequently, an important question for the U.S. in 2003 was how the tribes of Anbar would react to regime change, especially when it meant the loss of power and status. Those tribes were the center of gravity in the province; they were the central social and political unit long before and during Ba'athist rule. And they remained pivotal in the power vacuum that followed Saddam's demise.

The central U.S. goal should have been to keep them out of the hands of both the former regime elements and the Salafi jihadists led by Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi. Each had taken up arms against U.S. forces. If either was to turn resistance into a robust and protracted struggle in Anbar, it needed the help of the tribes. They were essential if a dogged fight against U.S. occupation was to be waged.

Tribal Engagement

It was not written in the stars that either the former regime elements or Zarqawi and the Salafi Jihadists would form a viable coalition with the tribes of Anbar. Those tribes were not the natural allies of either. But to be able to prevent such alliances form forming, the U.S. had to engage the Anbar tribes on their terms, based on their narrative. And that required developing a tribal engagement strategy that reflected an understanding of that narrative. The operational do's

and don'ts contained in Figure 2 constituted the foundation, the indispensable starting point, of that engagement strategy.

No such understanding informed the calculus of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in the days and months following Operation Iraqi Freedom. Rather, the CPA and its head, Paul Bremer, made all the wrong moves in 2003 when it came to Anbar. It would be left to the Marines in 2004 to pick up the pieces. But to do so, they had to base their operational plans on an understanding of the cultural context of Anbar and how to work inside the tribal system that dominates the human terrain found there. This would prove to be no easy task.

Operational Do's and Don'ts for Tribal Engagement

- Know the tribes' history and how important that history is to the Sunni Arab tribes of Anbar. Don't ignore or downplay it.
- Understand that the Sunni tribes of the Dulaymi confederation are made up of proud men who demand respect. Never downplay or give only fleeting attention to it.
- Learn, accept, and to the extent possible, emulate the code of values and beliefs that guide the tribes' behavior and ways of doing things. Most important to that system of principles is *honor*!
- Understand the system of prescribed methods used to bring to justice those who violate honor. They include revenge, blood feuds, and even war as the means for resolving such offenses.
- Know this is a male-dominated society and that demonstrating manliness is another one of those enduring aspects of the tribes' code of values. It is an essential requirement that men demonstrate courage and prowess in defense of the tribe.
- Know that Islam is likewise very salient to the Sunni tribesmen of Anbar. And even though it's complicated, recognize that there are four main schools of Sunni thought, only one of which predominant in Anbar.
- Know that the tribes of the Dulyami confederation are not a local social club, but political actors with a strong political identity. At different times, they have wielded considerable power and political clout.
- Understand that a core principle of these confederation affiliates is group solidarity. And when threats and dangers from outside appear, collective security and self-defense demands that all pull together.
- Be open to working with tribal leaders, even though they will not conform to modern conceptions of leadership as understood in organizations like the U.S. Marine Corps.
- Never think that the tribesmen of the Dulaymi confederation want to adopt our ways and become like us. They are living in tribal society

Figure 2: Operational Do's and Don'ts for Tribal Engagement

B. All the Wrong Moves

Just before entering Iraq as part of the 2003 American intervention to oust Saddam, a young Marine asked then Brig. Gen. John Kelly what would happen to Iraq after the coalition forces beat the Iraqi military. As he recounted later, Kelly had a confident response: "Well, we're America, the greatest nation on Earth. There is probably battalions worth of engineers and specialists and all that, and as we move north and take the regime down, they'll come in behind us and they'll establish democracy and take over the running of the country."[43]

But the battalions of specialists never followed. Planning for the Iraq war focused on overthrowing Saddam Hussein. The administration never developed a clear plan of what should happen the next day. Rather than facilitating the transition to reconstruction, post-conflict actions actively set that process back and threw fuel on a budding violent resistance to U.S. occupation. In 2003, the U.S. made all the wrong moves, and this had a serious impact on Anbar Province.

The story of the failure of pre-war planning for the "day after" Saddam was ousted has been told in several volumes.[44] The story of retired Gen. Jay Garner and the Office of Humanitarian and Reconstruction Assistance (OHRA) will not be recounted here. Suffice it to say they lacked the resources necessary to do almost anything. And then, at the end of April, Garner was replaced by L. Paul Bremer.

Bremer had little knowledge of Iraq and no experience in post-conflict reconstruction. But under his direction of the CPA, the American occupation took hold. In doing so, he was at the center of several ill-conceived decisions that fueled armed resistance in Anbar. What follows is a brief summation of those wrong moves.

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[43] Lt. Gen. John Kelly, presentation at the Fletcher School Roundtable "Marine Generals Discuss Anbar 2006," May 2, 2010. The session can be viewed at http://www.fletcher.tufts.edu/issp/Video.shtml.

[44] See David Phillips, *Losing Iraq: Inside the Postwar Reconstruction Fiasco* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2008); Larry Jay Diamond, *Squandered Victory: The American Occupation and the Bungled Effort to Bring Democracy to Iraq* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005); Jay Garner, "The Lost Year in Iraq," *Frontline* interview transcript, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/truth/interviews/garner.html.

Purging the Ba'athists

Bremer's first major decision set the tone. On May 16, 2003, he released a blanket de-Ba'athification edict. Order 1 dissolved the Ba'ath Party, removed the four most senior ranks from their jobs, and banned them from working for the government in the future; it also forbade all former Ba'athists, even junior members, from serving in the top three levels of government.[45]

According to Bremer, the order affected 20,000 people.[46] Others estimated that 40,000 or 60,000 Ba'ath Party members lost their jobs; given the impact of unemployment on families, the number affected was several times that.[47] Anthony Cordesman later said: "Nobody [in the CPA] made any effort to survey how many people would be excluded … it went down to far."[48] And it took a heavy toll on governance.[49]

The biggest losers were the Sunnis. Gone were their jobs, their family income, their children's schoolteachers, and their role in governance. Moreover, the decision sent a mailed fist to Anbar province and the Sunni Triangle: The postwar order was about removing Sunnis from national life. And as they looked to Baghdad, the Sunnis saw the U.S. putting the Shia in their place.

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[45] L. Paul Bremer and Malcolm McConnell, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope* (New York, NY: Threshold Editions, 2006) 40–41.
[46] Ibid., 42.
[47] Jay Garner, "The Lost Year in Iraq," *Frontline* interview transcript.
[48] Anthony Cordesman, "The Lost Year in Iraq," *Frontline* interview transcript, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/yeariniraq/interviews/cordesman.html.
[49] For example, two-thirds of the top people at the Health Ministry had to leave. One-quarter of the directors of various state-owned companies were sacked. Thousands of schoolteachers were unceremoniously fired, leaving schools in some Sunni regions with decimated faculties. In the Saddam era, teachers had a hefty incentive to join the party, as they received a bonus that multiplied their paychecks. At least 1,700 staffers and professors in Iraq's university system were fired. De-Ba'athification also effectively decapitated the Iraqi Police Services.

Cashiering the Army

Bremer's second major decision was to disband the Iraqi Army, demobilizing 250,000 to 350,000 personnel. CPA Order 2 sent a dark message to the Sunni-dominated officer corps, who unceremoniously lost paychecks and prestige. This move ran counter to standard thinking about how to handle combatants in post-conflict operations. According to one U.S. army colonel knowledgeable in these matters, "Anyone who has done post-conflict work says do not get rid of the military. You've got to control them. If you don't control them, you don't know what they're going to do."[50] But with Order 2, the CPA sent into the streets of Iraq thousands of unemployed armed men.

Bremer later announced a plan to pay stipends to out-of-work soldiers, but by that time the damage had been done. [51] The dissolution of the Iraqi Army sent a second foreboding message to the Sunnis of Anbar and beyond, who already felt marginalized.

Writing off the Tribes and Sheikhs

Bremer wrote in his memoir that he knew from diplomatic service in Afghanistan and Malawi how important tribes are in some countries. During his time in Iraq, he said he came to see how important tribal ancestry was to many Iraqis. But he seems to have also believed that tribal leaders would just go along with the new power configuration in Baghdad. "The tribes had a reputation for respecting power and had always been acutely aware of who was up and who was down. They were likely to support whoever exercised authority in Baghdad," he wrote.[52] The history of Iraq would suggest otherwise.

The attitude at the CPA was that to empower tribal leaders would take Iraq backwards. They were the antithesis of the modern regime Americans wanted to build. Noah Feldman, an advisor to the CPA in 2003, later recounted that tribal leaders had come to Bremer

[50] George Packer, *The Assassin's Gate* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 194.
[51] Douglas Feith, *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism* (New York: Harper, 2008), 433–34.
[52] Bremer and McConnell, *My Year in Iraq*, 90.

offering to work with the CPA to help stabilize the country. "We told them, 'No, we're not going to take Iraq back to the Middle Ages.'"[53]

Instead of working with the tribal leaders, the U.S. in 2003 followed policies that alienated them. This was certainly true in Anbar.[54] The idea that the traditional power of the Anbar sheikhs should be engaged to work with the CPA simply didn't resonate with the powers in Baghdad. Just the opposite was the case. This was made clear in Bremer's 2003 CPA-issued statement that "tribes are a part of the past" and "have no place in the new democratic Iraq."[55]

Limiting Anbar Resources

While Anbaris were being swept up in arrests and the military focus on kinetic tactics was inspiring anger, what they did not see early on were the basic bread-and-butter services that build goodwill and form the core of post-conflict program—jobs, electricity, government services, and more. And thenm after reconstruction aid arrived, the CPA sought to be even-handed with its use. What that meant was regions favored by Saddam got far less than they were used to. A case in point was electricity.

Before the war, Saddam distributed electrical power much as he distributed political power. Places where he was strong got almost

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[53] Noah Feldman, "Sacrificed to the Surge," *Newsweek,* April 5, 2008. Also see Feldman, *What We Owe Iraq: War and the Ethics of Nation Building* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). http://www.newsweek.com/2008/04/05/sacrificed-to-the-surge.print.html.

[54] The CPA's man in Al Anbar, Keith Mines, arrived in the summer of 2003. In September, he reported that the sheikhs were not happy with their treatment by the CPA or the military. "Al Anbar's sheikhs are expressing increasing resentment over what they perceive as a lack of respect for them by the coalition," Mines wrote. "Between detentions, arbitrary and often destructive house searches, and the recent killing of coalition-sanctioned police officers by coalition forces, the Anbar sheikhs say they are tired of not receiving the respect that their traditional position should convey." Thomas Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 241.

[55] Quoted in Joe Klein, "Is Al Qaeda Running Iraq," *Time* (May 23, 2007).

all the power they needed, while the Shiite south was left in the dark.[56] To the CPA, that was unfair. Bremer signed an order requiring that electricity be evenly distributed.[57] This effort to be even-handed, while laudable in principle, meant that in the Sunni triangle power levels fell to half of prewar levels.[58]

From Anbar, Col. David Teeples wrote to Bremer to plead for more electricity, saying that the province's supply is "our largest concern," citing rolling blackouts and "turbulence within the community." The lack of sufficient electricity in Anbar, Teeples wrote, was preventing factories from opening, spurring unemployment.[59] It was another grim signal to the Sunnis of Anbar: Their fate in the "new Iraq" was going to be a dark one.

Failure to Manage Sunni Fear

While Sunnis comprise only one-fifth of the Iraqi population, they have dominated the country's politics for hundreds of years. They had a lot to lose with the invasion. And with de-Ba'athification and the disbanding of the Iraqi Army, they did lose their traditional roles in national institutions, their income, their personal self-identity, and more. Moreover, they saw the Shia not just taking control of Baghdad's power ministries but also asserting authority in those institutions that affect day-to-day life.

In 2003, the CPA focused on gaining Shia support and keeping Kurdish support at the expense of managing Sunni fears. The CPA sought to correct Saddam's wrongs by favoring the once-oppressed Shiites and Kurds at the expense of the once-ruling Sunnis. These

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[56] Rajiv Chandresekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* (New York: Knopf, 2006),170; Rajiv Chandresekaran, "Blackouts Return, Deepening Iraq's Dark Days," *Washington Post*, July 3, 2003, http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A1629-2003Jul2?language=printer.

[57] Chandresekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*, 173.

[58] Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, Quarterly Report to Congress, March 30, 2004, appendix.

[59] James Dobbins, Seth Jones, Benjamin Runkle, Siddharth Mohandas, *Occupying Iraq: A History of the Coalition Provisional Authority* (Arlington, VA: RAND Corporation, 2009), 121.

actions fed Sunni fears. What were needed were policies to manage those fears.

Marine Lt. Gen. John Allen, who played a key role in the campaign in Anbar that led to the defeat of the al Qaeda-dominated insurgency, reflecting back on the policies described here as having created in 2004 "a perfect storm across Anbar," providing "the perfect opportunity for AQ [al Qaeda]."[60] The U.S. had made all the wrong moves and it was left to the Marines, who were sent to Anbar in March 2004, to to pick up the pieces.

Overarching Case Discussion Questions

1. "The war you prepare for is seldom the war you get."
    a. If this is true, what does this case study and your experience suggest are the enduring principles that operational and strategic leaders need to build into their planning processes?
    b. What key tools help operational and strategic leaders adapt to "the war they get?"

2. This case study deliberately focuses on just one organization's experience in one region in Iraq, the USMC in Anbar, but the applicability should be more generalizable.
    a. Are the Marines the only branch of the military that meets the six characteristics of a learning organization? Are the characteristics of a learning organization compatible with the structure and mindset of other branches of the military and intelligence communities? If not, can and should they be?
    b. How does this learning model compare to adaptive business models?

[60] Lt. Gen. John Allen, "Anbar Dawn: The Defeat of al Qaeda," text of a lecture given at The Fletcher School, Tufts University (March 11, 2009), 28.

c. What are the strengths and weaknesses of building adaptation into an organization? What factors does this capability depend on for success?
d. How does this model compare to the learning cycle of armed groups (the insurgents in this case study)? Do they learn faster, adapt faster, or do they face similar bureaucratic and practical limitations? What forces them to adapt, and what can we learn from their experience?

3. What was the effect of other factors in the success of the USMC in Anbar? This case study argues that success in Anbar was based on three pillars: USMC adaptation, the "Anbar Awakening" tribal movement, and the work of the special operations forces' Task Force 145. Each had a particular role to play, and this case study identifies the roles and the interaction between these three factors. Key discussion questions include:
    a. What was the role of internal tribal dynamics and rivalries in the willingness of the Anbar tribes to work with the USMC? (See Section V.)
    b. What was the effect of the special operations forces' Task Force 145 in helping to set the conditions for success in Anbar? (See Section VI.)
    c. How did the USMC's learning model help them to capitalize on these opportunities?

III. Insurgents and Marines

Those elements that came to comprise the insurgency in Anbar were not natural allies. They had differences in terms of why they took up arms and in the aims and goals they pursued. This is not surprising, given the history of insurgency, which has often been characterized by factional and internal rivalries that affect cohesion, cooperation, and effectiveness.

The different groups that comprised the insurgency in Anbar followed this historical pattern. As will be delineated later, these differences would eventually come to be seen by the Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) leadership as opportunities to exploit. But that understanding took time to materialize.

A. The Insurgents

The insurgency in Anbar included different groups of which there was considerable information on some, but next to nothing on others. This is not unusual in the shadowy world of armed groups. They are divided into two categories here: insiders and outsiders. The former came from within Anbar's Sunni Arab community, and are subdivided as former Ba'athist regime elements and Sunni Arab rejectionists. However, it should be noted that these distinctions "on the ground" in Anbar were not so clear cut. Outsiders were comprised of foreign radical Islamists. But here also things were not clear cut; there was a homegrown element as well.

Insiders: Former Ba'athist Regime Elements

There was "compelling evidence," writes Ahmed Hashim, that former Ba'athist regime members played "significant political and operational roles" in the insurgency in Anbar. While it was initially ad hoc, as it developed they adopted the Sunni Arab nationalist discourse as the motivation for armed resistance.[61] Those who made up the

[61] The reason for this, Hashim explains, was that they recognized that "they cannot say they are fighting to restore the old order." This was driven home by the fact that "several insurgent groups went out of their way to deny links to or

former Ba'athist regime elements of the insurgency came from the key coercive institutions that collectively kept the Ba'athist dictatorship in power.[62] They adopted several noms de guerre including the General Command of the Armed Forces, Resistance and Liberation in Iraq; the Patriotic Front; and the High Command of the Mujahideen in Iraq.

A July 2003 Ba'ath Party memo instructed these factions to establish "small and closed cells" and "transition to covert operations."[63] By early 2004 their attacks greatly escalated, and were increasingly sophisticated. They made extensive use of improvised explosive devices. Targets include police stations and other government facilities, oil pipelines, electrical plants, and military convoys, as well as Iraqi officials who cooperated with the U.S.

That the former Ba'athist regime elements refused "to go down without a fight" was predictable. After all, they had everything to lose and also had the capacity to organize clandestine networks. Their goal was to raise the cost of remaining in Iraq for the U.S. and, ultimately, to force Washington to withdraw.

Insiders: Sunni Rejectionists

Sunni Arab rejectionists came from different backgrounds and joined the insurgency for different reasons. Their ranks included members of regular army units. Dating back to the Iran war, the professional officer's corps of the army was drawn from Anbar and

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support for the former regime," and in some cases to express "antipathy…[for] those associated with the former regime." This was especially true for "those with a more Islamist association."Ahmed Hashim, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 89-90.

[62] They included the Iraqi Intelligence Service (Mukhabarat), the Special Security Organization, the Special Republican Guards, and the paramilitary Fedayeen Saddam.

[63] Edward Pound, "Seeds of Chaos," *U.S. News and World Report* (December 20, 2004), 20; also see Douglas Jehl, "Plan for Guerrilla Action May Have Predated War, *New York Times* (Nov. 15, 2003), A1.

other Sunni areas. Entire regiments came from Tikrit, Mosel, Ramadi, and Fallujah.

The CPA cashiered them, along with the rest of the Army, and had no disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program to facilitate their transition to civilian life. DDR is difficult, even when planned for and resourced. But to ignore it completely, as the CPA did, drove former army officers into the ranks of the resistance out of "shame and humiliation" and a desire "to repel the invaders and restore sovereignty."[64]

Rejectionists also came from within the Dulaymi tribal confederation of Anbar. Their motives derived from longstanding tribal traditions that reject authority imposed from Baghdad, as well as Iraqi nationalism with its equally longstanding opposition to outside invading forces. These traditions of hostility towards outside interlopers and central authority were exacerbated by Sunni fear that in a new Iraq they would be greatly discriminated against as retaliation for their privileged status under Saddam Hussein. And the CPA did not help matters by making little effort to reach out to them.

Also pushing the tribes to join the insurgency were U.S. tactics that included the use of excessive force against insurgent hideouts in Anbar. Not infrequently, these actions caused civilian casualties, triggering among the affected tribes a blood revenge responsibility for vengeance. Other missteps included the way U.S. forces searched private homes and detained suspects. These actions, said a Fallujah clan chief at the time, will make us "fight them to the death."[65]

In sum, Sunni rejectionists joined the insurgency for reasons of honor, tradition, revenge and national pride. To varying degrees, each of these factors inspired them to take up arms.

Outsiders: Salafi Jihadists

The U.S. invasion turned Iraq into a magnet for fighters from al Qaeda's global Salafi jihad movement. As with Afghanistan in the

[64] Hashim, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq*, 98.
[65] *Ibid.*, 107.

1980s, they were quickly attracted to Iraq.[66] The Afghan fight was the initial defining moment for this movement, as Sageman explains: "Militants from all over the Muslim world finally met and interacted for lengthy periods of time. The common fight forged strong bonds among them. After the Soviets withdrew, these militants started to analyze their common problems within a more global perspective, transcending their countries of origin."[67]

In April 2003, Iraq became the central front in the Salafi global war when bin Laden called for its warriors to join the fight there. Over the next several months they started arriving on their own or via an underground network that Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi helped establish with indigenous Islamic radicals known as Ansar Al-Islam. Together they began moving Islamist "zealots to northern Iraq."[68] The key point of entry was through Syria.

Zarqawi, a former Afghan mujahideen, returned to Afghanistan and established a training camp with funds in part provided by al Qaeda. He created Tawhid al-Jihad as an affiliate of al Qaeda that prior to 9/11 focused on Jordan, Israel, and Turkey. He also established networks in Europe to raise funds and arrange for the clandestine transit of Islamist fighters to various battle fronts. Zarqawi moved Tawhid al-Jihad to Iraq following the U.S. invasion and became AQ's de facto operational commander. While the size of his force was considered small by U.S. officials, it carried out the grizzliest attacks.

In July 2003, Tawhid al-Jihad began an indiscriminate series of bloody attacks. It detonated a car bomb against the Jordanian Embassy. Next it sent a suicide attacker to the United Nations headquarters and murdered the UN's top envoy in Iraq. This was followed by the murder of Shiite leader Muhammed Baqr al-Hakim. These actions gained Zarqawi international notoriety as the mastermind of al Qaeda's

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[66] See discussion in Olivier Roy, Carol Volk (Translator), *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).
[67] Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 8.
[68] 25. Rod Nordland, Tom Masland and Christopher Dickey, "Unmasking the Insurgents," *Newsweek* (February 7, 2005), 26.

operations in Iraq. In October 2004, he declared his allegiance to bin Laden.[69]

The Salafi jihadists in Iraq were comprised of both internationalists and homegrown warriors. One assessment of the former, drawn in early 2005 from Salafi websites, found the names of foreign jihaidist fighters who died in Iraq. Of the 154 names posted, 33 were said to have died carrying out suicide attacks. Saudis constituted 60% of the foreign jihadists killed and 70% of the suicide bombers.[70] Other records captured in Iraq for 2006–2007 show that Saudi Arabia was by far the most common nationality in this sample; 41% (244) of the 595 records that included the fighter's nationality indicated they were of Saudi Arabian origin. Libya was the next most common country of origin, with 18.8% (112) of fighters listing their nationality stating they hailed from Libya.[71]

Joining these international jihadists were their home-grown counterparts. Several Salafi armed groups appeared in 2003, including Ansar al-Sunnah and the Islamic Army of Iraq (IAI). These groups were made up of individuals "with ties to or admiration for Osama bin Laden." In Iraq, IAI "cooperated with Zarqawi's group," as did Ansar al-Sunnah.[72] They benefited from Zarqawi's skilled jihadists who worked on the ground with their Iraqi counterparts to provide training and operational know-how.

B. 1st Marine Expeditionary Force

In March 2004, the Marine Corps deployed part of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF) back to Iraq. It had first entered

[69] Bouchaib Silm, "Osama and Azzarqawi: Rivals or Allies?" *IDSS Commentaries* No. 55 (November 1, 2004), 3.
[70] Reuven Paz, "Arab Volunteers Killed in Iraq: An Analysis," Project for the Research of Islamist Movements (Prism) Occasional Papers (March 2005). Available at www.e-prism.org.
[71] Syria, Yemen, and Algeria were the next most common countries of origin with 8.2% (49), 8.1% (48), and 7.2% (43), respectively. Moroccans accounted for 6.1% (36) of the records and Jordanians 1.9% (11). Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Al Qaeda's Foreign Fighters in Iraq* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2008), 7-8.
[72] Hashim, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq*, p. 175.

Iraq on March 20, 2003, crossing the Iraq-Kuwait border as part of the coalition attack. On April 19, 2003, on the grounds of the dictator's Tikrit palace, the commander of I MEF, Lt. Gen. James Conway, announced that full-scale combat operations were over. Until I MEF departed in the summer, it was involved in SASO—security and stability operations—in the Shia south. What they found there was an infrastructure decimated by years of purposeful neglect.

SASO was not a mission for which it had prepared. Nevertheless, Marine units adapted, and when it was over, those involved were satisfied with the job they had done, believing they helped the Shia start on the long road to recovery. According to then Col. Joseph Dunford, who oversaw the SASO mission: "It worked pretty well … Things were going well in the south. And in each one of those cities … each of the commanders could point with some pride to the accomplishments and the progress they made."[73]

That experience, however, influenced how I MEF prepared for its return to Iraq, according to Col. James Howcroft, who was its intelligence chief at the time. "What we had done and the success we had in southern Iraq definitely colored our approach to going back to Anbar. We thought that what had worked in the south would work in the west as well," he noted.[74] As a result, "[We] thought we didn't need artillery, we would not need tanks because we hadn't needed them in southern Iraq."[75] When asked how he assessed the security environment in Anbar, Col. Howcroft said, "At the time it was considered generally permissive except for certain pockets. We knew Fallujah was bad."[76]

That assessment was reflected in I MEF's campaign plan. It was based on the following assumptions: (1) the environment in Anbar was generally permissive and the population *not hostile*; (2) the experience in southern Iraq would serve as the basis for the new effort; (3) I MEF would build on what was believed to be a successful stability

[73] Brig. Gen. Joseph Dunford, oral history interview conducted by Dr. Fred Allison for the U.S. Marine Corps History Division, Dec. 18, 2006, transcript, 3.
[74] Col. James Howcroft, interview with the author, December 2008.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.

operation carried out by the 82nd Airborne, but they would do so in a different and much less kinetic way; and (4) while they were likely to face some hostility, it was not an organized resistance or insurgency. Then Col. Dunford, the 1st Marine Division's chief of staff, recalled that during the planning "we were not talking about an insurgency at this point … The word *insurgency* wasn't used in the early part of 2004."[77]

Based on those suppositions, the campaign plan that I MEF drew up for Anbar left little doubt that its leadership believed they were embarking on a stability operation. Figure 3 shows the "15 plays," as they were termed by the planners, that comprised that campaign plan.

[77] Brig. Gen. Joseph Dunford, oral history interview conducted by Dr. Fred Allison for the U.S. Marine Corps History Division, Dec. 18, 2006, transcript, 15.

1. Coordinate and disseminate information operation messages to introduce Marines to the local populace and gain information superiority.
2. Unit commanders interact with local tribal, administrative, and religious leaders.
3. Meet with local governing councils in order to build rapport and gain credibility.
4. Diminish Iraqi population support for, or tolerance of, anti-Coalition forces.
5. Reduce Iraqi unemployment by creating public sector jobs as rapidly as possible and establish job security.
6. Increase the effectiveness of public services and local governing bodies.
7. Distribute school, medical, and children's recreational supplies.
8. Integrate the stability and support actions of Combined Action Program units in order to enhance Iraqi confidence.
9. Increase effectiveness of Iraqi security forces by providing basic and advanced training, close integration into our formations and supervision.
10. Develop the Sunni Advisory program.
11. Conduct patrols to include emphasis on joint patrols with Iraqi forces in order to build confidence and assess their abilities.
12. Initiate former Iraqi military engagement program. Use "veteran points" to bring former military to the forefront of employment efforts to display respect for former military and reduce adversarial relationships with them.
13. Commence identification of Former Regime Elements and terrorist cells, avoiding any loss of developed human intelligence sources.
14. Defeat anti-Coalition forces in coordination with Iraqi forces.
15. Disrupt enemy infiltration of Iraq through overland movement or movement along waterways. Special attention will be paid to the border regions to disrupt the introduction of foreign fighters with an initial emphasis on the Syrian border.

Figure 3: The "Five Plays"

C. Ugly Surprise

I MEF found out quickly that its campaign plan was not what the conditions in Anbar required. The environment was not permissive but very kinetic. What accounted for this mismatch? The answer, in part, lies in the intelligence the MEF used to prepare for deployment. Reflecting back, the G-2 of I MEF explained that all the intelligence he saw led him to conclude that Anbar "was generally permissive except for certain pockets." That was his bottom line at the time, based on available intelligence.[78]

But even after I MEF was on the ground and realized it was not SASO, understanding the conflict context remained a conundrum, according to Brig. Gen. Kelly. He had a bird's eye view of the evolving situation in Anbar. But trying to figure out that complex setting was not easy. As he watched the situation from Ramadi he posed the crucial question, one that would stump U.S. forces deployed to Iraq and their policy maker masters back in Washington for some time: "When do a bunch of guys that are trying to kill you turn into an insurgency?"[79] In other words, when do you know you are facing an organized opposition, and how do you figure out who makes up its constituent parts?

Gen. Kelly knew what he didn't know! And I MEF found itself facing one of those ambiguous, uncertain, and unforeseen challenges that Marine forces have faced throughout the Corps history. Remember Krulak's observation in *First to Fight.* Once more, Marines were engaged in a fight without a clear understanding of the context or of the enemy. The situation I MEF prepared for was not the one that confronted them in March 2004. Krulak's warning proved true: The "war you prepare for is rarely the war you get."[80]

And if that was not bad enough, I MEF soon faced the Fallujah crisis in Anbar. From April through the November assault that took control of the city, the bulk of its forces were bogged down outside of

[78] Col. James Howcroft, interview.
[79] Brig. Gen. John Kelly, oral history interview conducted by John Piedmont for the U.S. Marine Corps History Division, March 31, 2004, transcript, 17.
[80] Krulak, *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps*, p. 137.

Fallujah for political reasons. At the same time, the insurgency burgeoned elsewhere in Anbar. There were just not enough I MEF forces to go around. As a result, in more instances than not, the Marines were reacting to insurgent moves. They did not have control of the ground throughout the province. And in Fallujah, the enemy was given a sanctuary from which to project operations for six months.

The fight had settled into a deadly version of the arcade game Whac-a-Mole: Hit the insurgents hard in one location and they would withdraw, only to pop up somewhere else. They were using classic protracted irregular warfare tactics. Col. Howcroft, I MEFs intelligence chief, clearly recognized the reality of this situation. He explained, "Fallujah sort of put us back into our comfort zone and we did that [urban battle] quite well." But he added that, in terms of the larger struggle for control of Anbar, "I think it truly, truly hurt us … We needed time to set the conditions to be successful in Anbar." Fallujah prevented that from happening, and the insurgents capitalized on it. The bottom line for the G-2: "Fallujah took that time away; it set us back a year and a half, if not two years."[81] This would become apparent in 2005.

Discussion Questions

1. Col. Kelly asked, "When do a bunch of guys that are trying to kill you turn into an insurgency?"
2. What is your answer to this?
3. Why is an insurgency more operationally and strategically dangerous than a "bunch of guys"?
4. What are they key factors that help you identify that an organized armed resistance has formed? (See CIWAG case study *Reading the Tea Leaves: Proto-Insurgency in Honduras* by John D. Waghelstein.)
5. What factors help to transform a "bunch of guys" into an "insurgent organization"? What learning process do they need to go through in order to transform and survive?

[81] Col. James Howcroft, interview with the author, December 2008.

6. The above section emphasizes that you have to ask the right questions in order to find out the right answers, even when "the only constant is that the unexpected will always be present in the fight."
7. How can we discover our knowledge gaps?
8. What are the key factors that the USMC needed to identify in this situation? (See CIWAG case study *An Operator's Guide to Human Terrain Teams* by Norman Nigh.)
9. Do these factors depend on the situation, or can this framework be developed into general guidelines?
10. How can we teach the capacity to learn? Can this be turned into doctrine and the planning process? Or does this capability rest in the hands of skilled individuals?

IV. Learning

Organizations able to manage uncertainty are equipped with "tools … to make sense of the situations they face."[82] These include the capacity to acquire appropriate information through firsthand experience or learning by doing in order to make adjustments to the mission. II MEF faced several key learning junctures in 2005, each of which affected how II MEF understood the fight in Anbar. And each had an important impact on how I MEF shaped its campaign plan for going back in 2006, based on what II MEF learned in 2005.

A. Highly Persistent Conflict

When II MEF arrived in early 2005, Anbar was neither secure nor stable. Rather, MEF intelligence concluded that the escalating violence the province experienced in 2004 would *persist* in 2005. And that "highly persistent unrest" quickly translated into casualties as soon as Marines set boots on the ground.[83] The province was, according to

[82] Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, p. 5.
[83]Col. James Howcroft, interview with the author, December 2008.

an Embassy/MNF-I National Coordination Team assessment, ground zero for the insurgency.

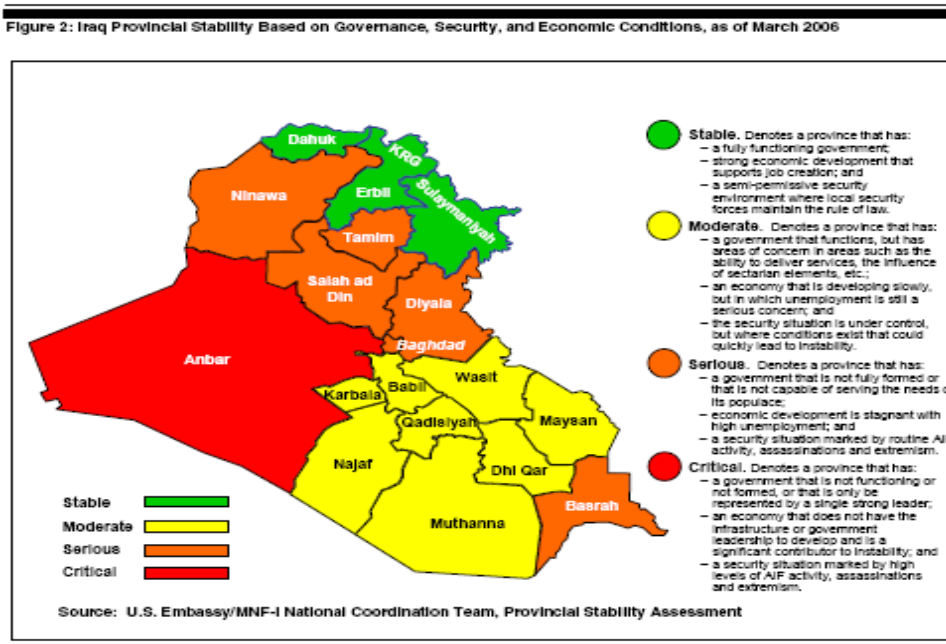


Figure 2: Iraq Provincial Stability Based on Governance, Security, and Economic Conditions, as of March 2006
Dahuk
KRG
Ninawa
Erbil
Sulaymaniyah
Tamim
Salah ad Din
Diyala
Baghdad
Anbar
Wasit
Karbala
Babil
Qadisiyah
Maysan
Najaf
Dhi Qar
Basrah
Muthanna
Stable
Moderate
Serious
Critical
Stable. Denotes a province that has:
– a fully functioning government;
– strong economic development that supports job creation; and
– a semi-permissive security environment where local security forces maintain the rule of law.
Moderate. Denotes a province that has:
– a government that functions, but has areas of concern in areas such as the ability to deliver services, the influence of sectarian elements, etc.;
– an economy that is developing slowly, but in which unemployment is still a serious concern; and
– the security situation is under control, but where conditions exist that could quickly lead to instability.
Serious. Denotes a province that has:
– a government that is not fully formed or that is not capable of serving the needs of its populace;
– economic development is stagnant with high unemployment; and
– a security situation marked by routine AIF activity, assassinations and extremism.
Critical. Denotes a province that has:
– a government that is not functioning or not formed, or that is only be represented by a single strong leader;
– an economy that does not have the infrastructure or government leadership to develop and is a significant contributor to instability; and
– a security situation marked by high levels of AIF activity, assassinations and extremism.
Source: U.S. Embassy/MNF-I National Coordination Team, Provincial Stability Assessment

Map 1: Iraq Provincial Stability, March 2006

Map 1 illustrates that in 2005 Anbar was the most perilous Iraqi province in terms of level of violence and instability. In no place was Sunni disaffection greater. It was within this context that AQI sought to exploit the situation and take charge of the insurgency.

B. Assessing the Insurgency

For II MEF, gaining an understanding of insurgency was the first order of business. The word from Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld well into 2004 was that this faceless enemy was made up of just "pockets of dead-enders," only "small elements of 10 to 20 people, not large military formations or networks of attackers."[84]

[84] "Rumsfeld Blames Iraq Problems on 'Pockets of Dead-Enders,'" *USA Today*, June 18, 2003, www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2003-06-18-rumsfeld_x.htm.

It did not look that way to II MEF. By 2005 the insurgency was quite robust, comprised of the elements described above. It was at this point that Al Qaeda made a power play to take it over and bend the insurgency to its will. Recall that in 2004, the constituent elements of the insurgency had formed into an *alliance of convenience* that had different objectives.

From within the Sunni social order, Anbar sheikhs, imams, and former Ba'athist military and civilian officials backed or joined nationalist resistance groups. They did so to fight the American occupation and to prevent what they believed was an impending Shia onslaught. Aligning with them were international Salafi jihadists (and their homegrown counterparts) who had designated Iraq as the central front, the forward edge of the global battle in which to engage the United States. They believed that by forcing the Americans to give up the fight in Iraq, they could inflict a defeat of enormous consequences on it. After doing so, they intended to establish a Salafi social order there.

This was an alliance of convenience and not a natural partnership. It was within this context that AQI sought to take control of the insurgency in 2005. Its goals were different from those of the Sunni nationalists. In 2003–2004, the latter had aligned with AQI and facilitated the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq, giving them safe haven in Anbar. In 2005, that partnership ended. AQI wanted control, not collaboration, and it intended to take it by marginalizing the sheikhs who backed the national resistance groups. They were part of the old Iraq, not of the new religious order AQI intended to establish.

This sounded like the CPA decision to write the tribes and sheikhs out of its own vision of the "new Iraq." But the draconian methods AQI intended to use to marginalize them were very different. At the time Anbari sheikhs, disenchanted with the ruthless methods and long-term intentions of their erstwhile partner, began to mount opposition, AQI moved to viciously cut it off with a campaign of murder and intimidation.

Al Qaeda believed such a campaign would overpower the sheikhs and their tribesmen. What transpired instead was tribal pushback. Evidently, AQI either forgot about tribal norms or, more

likely, thought it could simply steamroll over them. First in Al Qaim and then in Ramadi and elsewhere in Anbar, al Qaeda responded to resistance by killing respected tribal leaders. As a result, sheikhs began in early 2005 to approach the coalition forces and ask for help. But they were turned down. According to then Col. Joe Dunford, "In the spring of 2005, I met with dozens of sheikhs … They said they'd fight on our side, but refused to go through the government in Baghdad. In [early] 2005, we weren't willing to accept that deal."[85]

Cooperation with the tribes was still proscribed. The decision makers in Baghdad and Washington did not grasp the potential strategic opportunity that splits in the insurgent ranks might offer to the coalition. But by the fall, the Marine command in Anbar did. Those tribal militias that constituted the rank and file of the nationalist factions of the insurgency, as well as other tribal elements who were on the sidelines of the fight, could be directed by their sheikhs to fight al Qaeda.

What if the sheikhs ordered their men to do so in partnership with the Marine and Army forces in the province? The II MEF leadership began to see this as a potential game changer in Anbar.

C. II MEF's 2005 Campaign Plan

The campaign plan for II MEF consisted of five lines of operations to provide a framework for applying kinetic and non-kinetic actions aimed at gaining control of the ground in Anbar. The plan sought to separate the insurgents from the people, hold the ground, and then carry out those civil reconstruction activities that win counterinsurgency fights.

The first—security—was to establish safety for the population, isolate the insurgents from the population, and provide civilian agencies with the secure space needed to carry out those activities that make victory attainable. Security was the "table setter." It involved clearing and holding those cities that ran along the Euphrates River from Fallujah to Al Qaim. They were the most violent places in Iraq,

[85] Bing West, *The Strongest Tribe* (New York: Random House, 2008), 96.

each with substantial enemy presence. Security was the starting point. Without it, the Marines could achieve little in Anbar.

The second—building the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF)—was the force multiplier that would allow II MEF to hold those cities and the areas surrounding them. The Marines could clear, but only with ISF could they hold and secure.

The next two—governance and economic development—addressed those aforementioned activities that make victory attainable. Governance creates a context that allows elected officials to administer in an effective manner, to handle political grievances, and to provide basic services. Economic development establishes the infrastructure needed to support growth and provide the basics to achieve a decent quality of life.

The final line of operations focused on information and communication. These serve as the basis for developing a narrative, which provides the driving logic for the overall campaign plan.

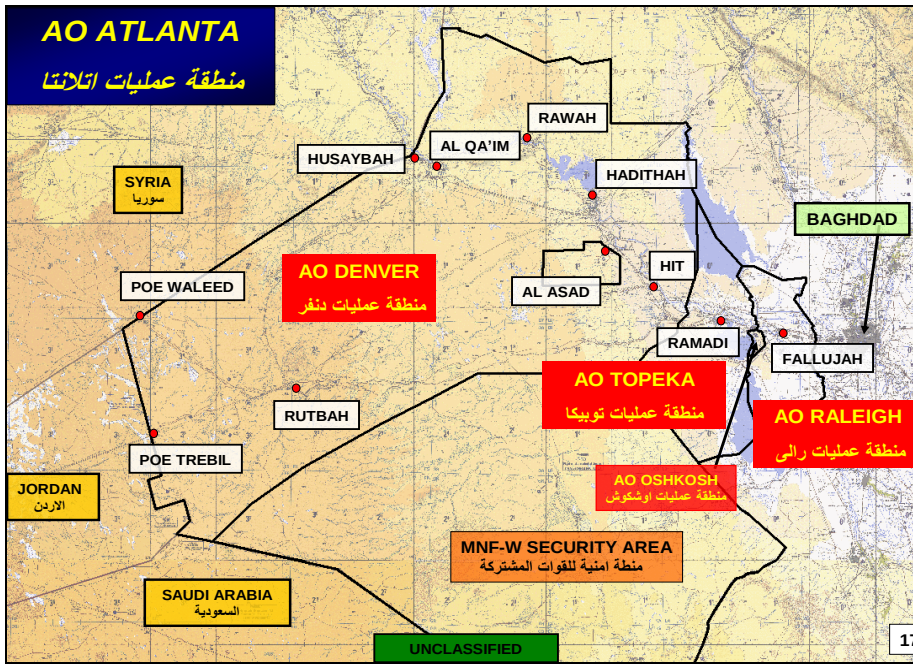
It was a comprehensive approach. But its starting point was security. Without security, without that separation of the insurgents from the people, those civil reconstruction activities would never get off the ground. For II MEF, security involved clearing the Euphrates River valley of major insurgent enclaves. According to Maj. Gen. Stephen Johnson, Operation Sayeed was intended to do just that. Consisting of "11 named operations under the Sayeed umbrella … the purpose … was to drive al Qaeda from the western Euphrates River Valley, and to eliminate it as a place where they could operate freely."[86] For the forces of II MEF, Operation Sayeed was all about the use of highly lethal force to find and eliminate the insurgents.

D. Clear and Hold

It did not take II MEF long to learn that it could clear insurgents out of one area after another but could not hold those areas once they were cleared. This was true in each of Anbar's three AOs (operational areas)—Denver, Topeka, Raleigh—as depicted in Map 2.

[86] Maj. Gen. Stephen T. Johnson, oral history interview conducted by Craig Covert for the U.S. Marine Corps History Division, January 26, 2006, 7–8.

Each AO had either a Marine regimental combat team (RCT) or Army brigade combat team (BCT) assigned to it. But in each AO, neither the RCT nor the BCT had the forces necessary to clear and hold.



Map 2: Anbar's Operational Areas

In AO Denver, RCT-2 sought to deny the insurgents the ability to operate with impunity against the routes connecting Husaybah, Al Qa'im, Rawah, Haditha, and Hit. Col. Stephen Davis, who commanded RCT-2, intended to sweep the insurgents out of those cities and destroy enemy networks and infrastructure. But AO Denver covered "30,000 square miles," noted Davis. To cover it, he had "less than 3,400 people in the entirety of the RCT."[87] The mission assigned RCT-2 was to "Go

[87] Col. Stephen Davis, oral history interview conducted by David Benhoff for the U.S. Marine Corps History Division, June 20, 2005, transcript, 6.

out there and disrupt and interdict."[88] And as soon as his battalions hit the ground, they were involved in disruption and interdiction operations.

But the results were always inconclusive. While initially a success—the insurgents were rousted from their nests—it was only a fleeting victory. They could remove a sanctuary, noted the commander of RCT-2, "for a certain amount of time." But the insurgents would be back as soon as the Marines withdrew. RCT-2 did not have enough forces to establish a lasting presence. "The enemy will go where we are not, and that's just the hard facts of life," said Davis."[89]

The 2005 campaign plan called for "full spectrum counter-insurgency operations," but as the year came to a close in AO Denver, that goal remained elusive. The same was true in AO Raleigh for RCT-8, said Lt. Col. William Mullen, the regiment's chief of operations. "We can go anywhere we want; we just can't stay there and maintain a presence because of the fairly large size of the AO."[90] Throughout its deployment, RCT-8 executed numerous large sweeps to drive the insurgents out of their redoubts. But as in AO Denver, the enemy would return as soon as they departed.

The insurgent center of gravity in Anbar was AO Topeka. And within the AO, Ramadi was ground zero. The city and its environs were an AQI stronghold. U.S. intelligence believed Zarqawi had his headquarters north of the city. An Army BCT attached to II MEF had responsibility for AO Topeka. In 2005 that was 2-2 BCT, which was replaced by the 2-28 BCT in August.

Neither brigade had the capacity to clear, let alone hold, Ramadi. Just to maintain a presence, 2-2 assigned three battalions. Ramadi and its outskirts were geographically daunting because this area spread along the Euphrates River for nearly 40 kilometers. Ramadi was just too large to sweep and hold for 2-2 BCT. Its units were largely restricted to a handful of bases, which gave the insurgents plenty of

[88] Ibid., 8, 11–12.
[89] Ibid., 22.
[90] Lt. Col. William Mullen, oral history interview conducted by David Benhoff for the U.S. Marine Corps History Division, June 11, 2005, transcript, 3.

space to hide among Ramadi's 500,000 residents. This included the Government Center, which had been riddled with bullet holes from countless firefights between coalition forces and insurgents. To resupply it, the Marine battalion assigned to 2-2 had to fight their way in and out. They were magnets for unrelenting insurgent fire.

By the summer of 2005, it was clear to II MEF's leadership that they were ensnared in a protracted irregular fight with an enemy they had no way of subduing. They did not have the necessary forces to clear and hold Anbar's three AOs. They were in an endless game of Whac-a-Mole. The way out of it, they thought, was to build up Iraqi security forces in the province.

E. No ISF Solution

In 2005, the 1st and 7th Iraqi Army (IA) Divisions were assigned to II MEF. The IA forces, along with local police, were seen as the keys to establishing stability and control. But that goal, II MEF was to learn, was out of reach in Anbar. The reasons for this had to do with the composition of the 1st and 7th Divisions. They were undermanned and largely comprised of Shiites, with some Kurds. That made them persona non grata in the Sunni Triangle. The notion that battalions comprised of non-Sunnis were going to live amongst the people of Anbar and provide them with security was a non-starter in 2005.

Establishing local police forces in Anbar in 2005 proved even more challenging. In November of 2004, all the police in the province had been fired because of corruption, incompetence, or connections with elements of the insurgency. Consequently, Maj. David Barnes, the officer in charge of the Police Partnership Program, and his unit started from scratch.

By the end of 2005, they had had some success in Fallujah, which was under the control of RCT-8 forces. Having established a process for selection, the Police Partnership Program eventually was able to train and certify 1,200 police officers for Fallujah. It took most of the year to accomplish, but they were able to do so because Marines held the ground.

Elsewhere in Anbar the results were very poor, especially in Ramadi and cities west of it. As a result, the Police Partnership Program could not come even close to recruiting the number of men needed in Anbar. It was another setback for II MEF.

F. Opportunity

In the spring and summer of 2005, signs began to surface indicating that the insurgent alliance in Anbar was fragmenting. Sheikhs were starting to oppose AQI. The collaboration among the insurgent factions that existed in 2004 was beginning to come apart. Blunders by Zarqawi and his foreign fighters were fostering a backlash, providing opportunities for the Marines of II MEF to exploit.

This first presented itself in AO Denver, where the Albu Mahal tribe in Al Qa'im was at odds with AQI. Several factors contributed to this fissure. First was AQI's demand for half of the tribe's smuggling profits. That was too much. Business was business, but this was extortion. Likewise, the tribe rejected AQI's goal of establishing a rigid Salafi-style social system similar to what had existed in Afghanistan under Taliban rule. The sheikhs had no desire to live under such a puritanical order. The way AQI fought was also unacceptable to them. Sure, they were killing Marines, but many Ablu Mahal died as well in the indiscriminate suicide attacks that Zarqawi's fighters employed. When the sheikhs implored AQI to desist in these matters, they became targets themselves.

These developments drove the Albu Mahal to RCT-2 and during the fall months, they began cooperating against AQI. The sheikhs formed an independent militia group called the Desert Protectors to patrol the Syrian border with Marines. Those local tribal fighters provided border security and acted as scouts for Marine forces. The stricture against such cooperation was no longer the modus operandi in AO Denver.

It was an opportunity Washington had missed earlier. But in the fall of 2005, pragmatism was replacing ill-conceived restrictions laid down by the CPA in 2003. The tribes were no longer part of the past. And if the Desert Protectors did not want to deploy out of the Al Qa'im region because they would not be able to protect their tribal

members, well, that was okay, too. There were plenty of AQI fighters coming across the border to keep them occupied.

Al Qa'im was an important turning point, but it was not the only one. In Ramadi, AQI's center of gravity, the Albu Fahd, one of the most important tribes of the Dulaymi confederation in AO Raleigh, was likewise changing sides. Then, groundbreaking meetings took place in November and December in Ramadi to explore the basis for engagement and partnership. Here were the origins of the tribal engagement dimension of the strategy that I MEF initiated in 2006. As will be elaborated below, that three-dimensional strategy of the "clear, hold, build" phases of counterinsurgency, tribal engagement to solidify local security, and counterterrorism operations to attack the insurgent's secret underground network was the basis for Marine Corps success in Anbar.

A key figure facilitating those initial engagement discussions was the governor of Anbar province, Mamoon Sami Rashid al-Alwani. In 2005, he began advocating for dialogue between the sheikhs and the II MEF. The first development that made this possible was his interaction with the 2nd Marine Division's assistant division commander, Brig. Gen. James Williams. The two men developed a close working relationship. Next, Mamoon was able to enlist the support of prominent sheikhs. They saw engagement with the coalition as a way out from under AQI. One of those sheikhs was Albu Fahad leader Nasser al-Mukhlif, who became a key figure in the November-December conferences hosted by Mamoon and Williams.

Those meetings were the beginning of an engagement process that would culminate by the summer of 2007 in the strategic defeat of AQI in Anbar. The focus was on what kind of local security forces to establish in Anbar and what their relationship would be to the coalition. The key element in those initial discussions—the police—would come to serve as the foundation for holding the ground in the province in 2006–2007.

That II MEF embraced this opportunity was another critical learning juncture in 2005. As the year ended, Anbar was in the throes of a transition, although many in Washington were not aware of it or

the implications it could have for AQI's hold on the province. They viewed Anbar through the lens of escalating violence, and their perceptions were colored by the brutal fighting the Marines had engaged in during the year. But in the midst of that fight, II MEF found a way forward to be able to clear and hold in Anbar through engagement and partnership. The sheikhs that took part in the November-December talks brokered by Governor Mamoon had an alternative in mind—grassroots Sunni security forces drawn from the tribes of the Dulaymi confederation. This was an opportunity-in-waiting that I MEF would exploit in 2006.

Discussion Questions

1. What role, if any, did the US military's lack of understanding about the local culture and local dynamics play in the rise of the insurgency?
2. How quickly and with what results did the USMC overcome these initial gaps?
3. What were the key factors in overcoming these initial results?
4. How can the information learned by current forces in the field be transferred early enough to the relief unit, prior to their deployment?
5. At what level should this transfer take place?
6. How can small unit-level innovations, learning, and adaptation be captured and disseminated to other units?
7. To what extent are operational tempo and lack of resources barriers to learning? What are the other barriers? How did the USMC overcome these in Anbar?

V. Adapting

Organizations that successfully navigate the learning cycle capture the lessons from their operational experiences and embed them into the organization's memory through various processes or routines. Routines guide behavior and can take the form of rules, procedures, and strategies around which organizations are constructed and through which they operate.

In the case of the Marine Corps, those routines include a set of procedures wherein one operational unit, in this case a MEF, relieves another one. Those procedures entail mechanisms by which the replacement unit embraces and incorporates the experiences and knowledge gained from the deployment of the unit it is relieving. Through that interaction, it then adjusts its campaign plan in ways designed to correct gaps in the performance of its predecessor, in order to maximize success during its upcoming deployment. These procedures shaped the relief in place (RIP) process in which I MEF replaced II MEF in the early 2006.

A. Surging Violence and Grim Prognoses

As I MEF prepared to deploy back to Anbar for its second round, a SITREP for the province would have followed the conventional wisdom at the time: *surging violence and grim prognoses.* Enemy violence was skyrocketing, while almost every prediction for U.S. success in Anbar was spiraling downward.

At the epicenter of this deteriorating state of affairs was Ramadi, Anbar's capital. By 2006, it had assumed the moniker of "the most dangerous city in Iraq." Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) had taken charge of it. Having been driven from its Fallujah stronghold in late 2004 by Operation Al Fajr, AQI relocated to Ramadi. By 2006 it had taken over the city and declared it the capital of its new Islamic caliphate. The only ground MEF forces held there was the Government Center, and it was often under enemy attack.

Ramadi was not the only place AQI redeployed. Five other major towns up the Euphrates corridor—Hit, Haditha, Anah, Rawah,

and Al Qa'im—likewise had a robust AQI presence. Each "witnessed heavy clashes resulting in the death of hundreds of local citizens and the destruction of thousands of shops, schools, houses and government buildings." At least that's what the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported on IRIN, its humanitarian news service. Anbar "has witnessed more fighting and killing than any of Iraq's 18 provinces."[91]

Those who collect statistics added further confirmation of the gloomy state of affairs awaiting I MEF. January 2006 saw approximately 2,000 insurgent attacks across Iraq's 18 provinces. By October, that number was well over 5,000.[92] Anbar, one of those 18 provinces, accounted for nearly 1,500 of those acts of violence. This was higher than in Baghdad, which, in terms of population, is five to six times bigger.[93]

B. AQI's Targeted Killing

When tribal sheikhs began negotiating with the MEF leadership in late 2005 and 2006, it greatly worried AQI, which saw this as a survival threat. If the police came to be filled with local tribesmen sent by their sheikhs, AQI operatives would no longer be able to "hide in plain sight." The local population knew who they were, and if they started feeding that information to the police and U.S. military, AQI would find itself out of business in Ramadi.

One of the most important sheikhs involved in those 2005 deliberations was Nasser Abd al-Karim Mukhlif al-Fahdawi of the Albu Fahad tribe. In early 2006, he organized a *majlis* (meeting) with Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jafari and U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad in Baghdad. Jafari was not keen on the idea of recruiting Sunni tribesmen into local police forces that Baghdad did not control. But Khalilzad had a different view of Sunni tribal engagement: it was

[91] IRIN, "Anbar Province Plagued by Violence," January 15, 2007, www.irinnews.org

[92] See "OIF-Iraq Significant Activities," www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/iraq_sigacts.htm.

[93] U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Securing, Stabilizing and Rebuilding Iraq* (June 2008), 20.

an opportunity, if managed properly. He convinced Jafari to agree they could be recruited to help I MEF drive al Qaeda out of Anbar. Nasser said the sheikhs would provide the recruits.

The very next day, Sheikh Nasser and his brother were gunned down. This was the start of a fierce counterattack to stop tribal engagement. Within weeks, several other sheikhs were assassinated. Al Qaeda intended to use terror to keep an iron grip on the province. The violence unleashed by Zarqawi was ferocious. Consequently, cooperation between the sheikhs and I MEF declined precipitously. Terror was working. It was going to take a proactive engagement effort by I MEF to break AQI's vise grip. But as we shall see, that engagement course of action was not a standalone undertaking, as some analysts have argued.[94] Rather, it was an integral part of a three-dimensional strategy that consisted of the counterinsurgency phases of "clear, hold, build," tribal engagement to expand the operating force available to the MEFs to ensure local security, and targeted counterterrorism aimed at degrading al Qaeda's clandestine apparatus.

C. I MEF's Operational Plan

Maj. Gen. Richard Zilmer, the I MEF commander, intended to take a "different approach to the counterinsurgency fight in Anbar."[95] What that meant, said his deputy, Brig. Gen. Robert Neller, was focusing on population control and population security: "This fight is for population control, and we want to have control so that we can provide security for the population … [We intended to] keep the insurgents out, keep the good people in, and be able to provide them

[94] Jon Lindsay and Roger Petersen, "Varieties of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq, 2003-2009." Case study prepared for the Naval War College Center for Irregular Warfare and Armed Groups (September 2011).

[95] Maj. Gen. Richard Zilmer, oral history interview conducted by Kurtis Wheeler for the U.S. Marine Corps History Division, January 23, 2007, transcript, 2.

with a secure environment so that they're confident in the security forces, and [will] tell us when the bad guys move in on them."[96]

I MEF built its campaign plan around "clear, hold, build." And it intended to implement it methodically, using the oil spot approach, one of those classic COIN tenets from the 1950s and 1960s. In this approach, the counterinsurgent forces concentrate on a specific area, take control of it, secure the population, and then expand that secured zone outward. It is not a complicated concept, but its implementation is another matter. How I MEF intended to do so was spelled out in its operational plan (OPLAN) for 2006.[97] And that plan drew heavily on what I MEF had learned from II MEF's experiences.

A key element in the OPLAN called for I MEF to expand Anbar's police. The goal, recalled Zilmer, was "to make as many police as we could possibly make, to train them properly … and to increase the size and the capability of the Iraqi Army."[98] He believed that a key driver for counterinsurgency success would come through expansion of the local police.

As noted earlier, II MEF had tried this in 2005, but was only able to recruit a handful of men. Recruiting Anbari citizens into the ranks of local police had been an exercise in futility. Zilmer, Neller, and their planning staff knew they had to make adjustments.

One of those adjustments assumed that to successfully recruit local police, it was necessary to clear and hold the area they were expected to supervise. Once done, those local police could then be protected from major insurgent counterattacks. This provided them with the security they need to carry out local policing. I MEF's planning staff understood the logic of this basic COIN sequence. They had to demonstrate that they would not leave the local police out there

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[96] Brig. Gen. Robert Neller, oral history interview conducted by Kurtis Wheeler for the U.S. Marine Corps History Division, January 23, 2007, transcript, 6.

[97] Maj. Gen. Robert Neller, "Lessons Learned: Some Thoughts on COIN," *Marine Corps Gazette*, February 2010, 11.

[98] Maj. Gen. Richard Zilmer, presentation at Fletcher School (Tufts University) roundtable, "Marine Generals Discuss Anbar 2006," May 2, 2010, http://www.fletcher.tufts.edu/issp/Video.shtml

on their own, an important commitment the sheikhs had to have faith in.

To make that point, I MEF picked Anbar's most dangerous city—Ramadi—-as the place to lay down its marker. Zilmer tasked his planning team to "put together a … very detailed plan to secure the provincial capital." That design called for securing parts of the city before seeking to engage the sheikhs and their tribesmen in the COIN process. According to one of the planning officers, this was because the sheikhs were hunkered down in the face of AQI's murder and intimidation campaign.[99]

Zilmer's planning team surveyed the city with overhead imagery to determine where to put each check point, each police station and, most importantly, each combat outpost (COP) that would station I MEF forces in Ramadi on a 24/7 basis. That is how they would start to secure the ground in the city and from there spread outward. "We had a … very methodical plan," summed up the planning officer, "to build oil spot zones of security and build out from there."[100]

This was the starting point, and it had to precede tribal engagement. Take the ground, and demonstrate to the sheikhs that you intended to stay on it. That was the signal they were looking for. The sheikhs would work against AQI, as some of them had already demonstrated. But they needed to believe I MEF would secure their flanks and cover their backs. According to Neller: "There is much talk about 'clear, hold, and build' as a methodology for COIN operations. You cannot perform these tasks if you don't stay in an area and establish a presence and, more importantly, a relationship with the people."[101]

This was the foundation of the OPLAN that I MEF's planning staff devised in early 2006: to establish and maintain presence among the people of Anbar, be they in Ramadi, or in other cities and towns

[99] Maj. Alfred B. Connable, oral history interview contained in *Al Anbar-Awakening: American Perspectives,* Vol. 1 (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University, 2009). 125–29.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Neller, "Lessons Learned," 11.

running along the Euphrates up to Al Qa'im. Do that and the door to tribal engagement with the sheikhs will open.

And if those sheikhs gave the signal, men from their tribal militias could easily fill the ranks of the local police. Reviving the police required "a strong buy-in from the tribal sheikhs," explained Zilmer. "The most important social custom … for the Anbar people is that tribal-sheikh relationship. … We had to learn that."[102]

Effectively engaging the sheikhs also meant learning, accepting, and, as much as possible, embracing the code of values and beliefs that guide their behavior and the ways they do things. "We recognized that dealing in a counterinsurgency in the Middle East or in the Arab world requires a fundamental understanding of their culture … We spent a lot of effort to get our Marines sensitive to that," said Gen. Zilmer. There is "a certain style and methodology that is unique to their culture, and we ignore that at our own peril, and we set ourselves up for frustration." I MEF had to get the fact that they were "walking into a new culture" with a different set of norms that they had to adapt to.[103]

All of that made sense—in theory. But carrying out tribal engagement on the ground in Anbar tested the extent to which I MEF could adapt. Consider the experience of Lt. Col. Scott Shuster, the CO of Marine Combat Battalion 3/4 in AO Denver.

In discussing how tribal engagement necessitated becoming "comfortable with cultural norms," the battalion commander pulled out a photograph of himself "walking down the street [in Al Qa'im] holding hands with the mayor. Here in Iraq," he said, "in this culture, walking hand in hand down the street says we are friends, we trust each other, I will do things for him, he will do things for me, this is my brother. It is a sign of respect and it is a sign of acceptance." Now that's adaptation. Lt. Col. Shuster quickly added, "I wouldn't do that in the United States."[104]

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[102] Maj. Gen. Richard Zilmer, interview.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Lt. Col. Scott Shuster, oral history interview conducted by Kurtis Wheeler for the U.S. Marine Corps History Division, December 28, 2006, transcript, 12.

D. Topeka, Denver, Raleigh

In each of Anbar's areas of operations—Topeka, Denver, Raleigh—I MEF's campaign plan was put into practice in 2006. The results are briefly highlighted below.

In 2006 AO Topeka was assigned to the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division—the "Ready First"—commanded by Col. Sean MacFarland. The unit deployed to Anbar in May from Tal Afar. That earlier deployment was important for the Ready First. In Tal Afar, it was introduced to the counterinsurgency operations successfully executed in 2005 by the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment commanded by Col. H. R. McMaster. However, in Ramadi the Ready First was not falling in behind a COIN operation that was well underway.

Ramadi was very different. "It was a pretty dire situation," recalled MacFarland. "Ramadi was essentially under enemy control." AQI "had freedom of movement throughout most of the city … If we tried to get close to the center of the city … we would come into heavy contact … al Qaeda dominated the city … Zarqawi was known to be out there." And he had plenty of fighters with him. [105]

Upon arriving in the AO, Col. MacFarland was told by I MEF's Gen. Zilmer to "fix Ramadi but don't do a Fallujah."[106] That meant taking a COIN approach. MacFarland was ready for that, having conducted COIN up in Tal Afar. And Zilmer had embedded COIN in his OPLAN for the theater. It was just the right confluence of thinking and planning, recalled MacFarland.[107] He intended to use Ready First units to *clear* and *hold* Ramadi. And Zilmer assigned Marine Battalion 1/6 to give MacFarland extra boots on the ground.

Step one was the "isolation of the city." The days of AQI moving in and out at will had to end. Next, MacFarland intended to establish combat outposts in Ramadi "to take the city and its environs

[105] Col. Sean MacFarland, interview conducted by the Contemporary Operations Study Team, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, January 17, 2008, http://cgsc.cdmhost.com/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/p4013coll13&CISOPTR=1010, 25.
[106] Ibid., 29.
[107] Brig. Gen. Sean MacFarland, interview with the author, February 16, 2010.

back [from AQI] one neighborhood at a time." And once a COP owned a piece of ground in the capital, they would engage the local sheikhs, convincing them "we intend to stay." And then they would encourage the sheikhs to partner up and send their tribesmen to join the local police force in "the secured neighborhood."[108] Here we see the symbiotic relationship between the counterinsurgency phases of "clear and hold" and tribal engagement's role in expanding the available operating forces to ensure local security continuity.

This was the beginning. It set in motion the spreading of the oil spot across Ramadi. In neighborhood after neighborhood, the soldiers and Marines under MacFarland's command took control. And because AQI could not be sure where the next COP would spring up, said the colonel, "We found out pretty quickly that we were able to get in and set up … overnight and the enemy usually took about 48 hours to respond." The brigade "had to dedicate a fair amount of combat power to securing each COP and protecting the lines of communications [LOC]" between the COPs because "we knew AQI would try to come back in behind us and reseed our LOCs with IEDs."[109]

In effect, MacFarland's men were beginning to network Ramadi with combat outposts that established "mutually supporting and interlocking fields of fire and observation along those LOCs [that linked them together]. That was … the process."[110] And playing a key role in that campaign in central Ramadi—ground zero in the fight to oust al Qaeda—was the 1st Battalion, 6th Marines, under the command of Lt. Col. William Jurney.

This was the sign the sheikhs wanted to see. But combat outposts were only one side of COIN. The other side was to establish Iraqi police substations at or near the COPs. To do this, Iraqi police were needed, and in large numbers. To fill those police ranks, the sheikhs began sending their tribesmen to help spread the oil spot.

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[108] Neil Smith and Sean MacFarland, "Anbar Awakens: The Tipping Point," *Military Review*, Mar.-Ap. 2008, 43.
[109] Col. Sean MacFarland, interview conducted by the Contemporary Operations Study Team, 31.
[110] Ibid.

As these developments unfolded during the fall months of 2006, al Qaeda understood what they signaled for the fate of its caliphate. It escalated the violence, increasing the number of daily attacks. But the combination of tribal engagement and combat outposts proved toxic to AQI's efforts to dominate Ramadi."[111] The soldiers and Marines under Col. MacFarland's command were taking hold of Ramadi, with the help of rapidly growing numbers of police. They had initiated a process that their replacements in 2007 would complete.

In AO Denver, RCT-7 arrived on the heels of Operation Steel Curtain, a successful 2,000 Marine sweep to dislodge insurgents from Hit, Haditha, Hussaybah, and Al Qa'im. Col. William Crowe planned to build on Steel Curtain by "spreading that oil spot."[112] Specifically, he intended to take RCT-2's success in holding Al Qa'im and emulate it. Having swept AQI out, RCT-2 left "one American battalion" in place to hold. That told the sheikhs they could count on RCT-2. Crowe intended to reinforce that message throughout the AO.

Having a lock on Al Qa'im, the RCT-7 chief applied the same approach to the towns along the Euphrates corridor, including Rawah, Anah, Haditha, Baghdadi, and Hit. For each, it was the same COIN method implemented in town after town down to the Ramadi outskirts. That is what Col. Crowe meant by "spreading that oil spot."

Finally, responsibility for AO Raleigh in the spring of 2006 was assigned to RCT-5, commanded by Col. Lawrence Nicholson. The model that he seized upon for the AO was the successful COIN program in Fallujah. It was an outstanding illustration of "clear, hold, build." Col. Nicholson explained: "We've had significant success in the Fallujah AO … When we took over from RCT-8 the seeds were already there … we inherited a better situation. We had more [local] security forces in this part of Al Anbar." The city had a robust Iraqi police force, and they helped make Fallujah, in the colonel's

[111] Smith and MacFarland, "Anbar Awakens: The Tipping Point," 51.
[112] Col. William Crowe, oral history interview conducted by Kurtis Wheeler for the U.S. Marine Corps History Division, January 1, 2007, transcript, 8.

estimation, "without peer in terms of security" in any of Iraq's cities.[113] And that security and stability, empowered by engagement, opened the door for political progress and economic recovery. Fallujah had a functioning city council and thorough engagement efforts were under way to rebuild infrastructure and jumpstart business.

Nicholson thought that if it worked in Fallujah, spread it elsewhere in AO Raleigh to provide stability and security to the rest of the population. It was basic counterinsurgency principles. "You must go back to the people. You must engage the people. ... Look," he exclaimed in a 2010 reflection on what RCT-5 achieved, "It's the people, stupid."[114]

Key to RCT-5's success was the growth of the Iraqi security forces. "We have almost doubled our battle space in terms of geography … We now go all the way to damn near to Ramadi," said Col. Nicholson in March 2007. "We've been able to do that because we've turned over a lot of existing battle space to Iraqis … I have three Iraqi brigades, all of which are now independent brigades … I'm incredibly pleased with our Iraqi police work … I don't know of anybody who has had the kind of success we have had with the police."[115] As a result of these developments, RCT-5's mission was evolving by the end of its deployment, with non-kinetic activities on the increase.

E. The Awakening: A Force Multiplier

These developments in Denver, Topeka, and Raleigh could not have taken place without tribal engagement. The sheikhs had to send men to the police for I MEF to gain the manpower needed to "hold" the ground across Anbar.

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[113] Col. Lawrence Nicholson, oral history interview conducted by Kurtis Wheeler for the U.S. Marine Corps History Division, January 3, 2007, transcript, 2.

[114] Brig. Gen. Lawrence Nicholson, presentation at Fletcher School (Tufts University) roundtable, "Marine Generals Discuss Anbar 2006," May 2, 2010, http://www.fletcher.tufts.edu/issp/Video.shtml.

[115] Col. Lawrence Nicholson, oral history interview, transcript, 8.

But getting them to do so in the aftermath of AQI's ferocious murder and intimidation campaign was not easy. That is why I MEF's plan called for RCT-7, RCT-5, and the Ready First to demonstrate that they would not leave once they cleared an area, which was an important assurance that the sheikhs had to trust in. As was noted earlier, the counterinsurgency phases of "clear, hold, build" were symbiotically interrelated with tribal engagement in Anbar, and they were implemented in conjunction with one another.

Well aware of the consequences of the sheikhs aligning against it, al Qaeda gave no quarter into the summer months. Then it went too far in August when it murdered Sheikh Abu Ali Jassim, who had been encouraging members of his tribesmen to join the police and resist AQI. After killing him, his assassins hid the sheikh's body rather than returning it for a proper burial. This violated Islamic law and inflamed not only Sheikh Jassim's fellow tribesmen, but many other sheiks from across Al Anbar.

In conjunction with the signals being sent through the operations of RCT-7, RCT-5, and the Ready First a critical turning point had been reached. The situation was ripe for engagement, a fact that several sheikhs came to embrace, most importantly Sheikh Abdul Sittar albu-Risha. His father had been murdered by AQI, as were two of his brothers, all for opposing AQI's imposition of its interpretation of Sharia law.

Sheikh Ahmed, Sittar's brother and the paramount sheikh of the Albu Risha tribe, recalled in a 2009 interview how those days unfolded: "We realized that the people had had it with the [al Qaeda] situation … So Sheik Sittar and I, we … got in touch with the tribal sheikhs and their cousins … to fight al-Qaeda." Sittar told his brother, "Leave it to me. I'll take care of it." And he began "talking with the tribal sheiks, one by one … He gathered them for a conference on the 14th of September, 2006."[116]

[116] Sheikh Ahmad Bezia Fteikhan al-Risha, oral history interview conducted by Gary Montgomery and Tim McWilliams for the U.S. Marine Corps History Division, February 17, 2009, transcript, 2.

At that meeting, an important segment of Anbar's leading tribal sheiks agreed to align with I MEF to fight AQI. The main room of Sattar's house, recalled Col. MacFarland, was filled with sheikhs and "all kinds of other guys lining the walls." Sheikh Sittar came to the doorway to greet the brigade commander and brought him "up to sit down with him at the head chair at the head of the room … to explain that they wanted to form this Awakening movement."[117]

The central importance of tribal engagement in counterinsurgency operations was well understood by Gen. Zilmer and the I MEF staff. They embedded it in their operational plan for Anbar. So, when Sittar and over 50 leading sheikhs and other important political figures met on September 14 to get the Anbar Awakening Council off the ground, I MEF was leaning forward to work with them. It was in the OPLAN, which had been structured to facilitate engagement by staying in place. All the pieces were coming together for a reversal of fortune in Anbar.

F. The Tipping Point

By December, the situation across Anbar was tipping in favor of I MEF and against AQI. If II MEF had learned in 2005, I MEF utilized those lessons to adapt in 2006. Its COIN-based operational plan with the interrelated elements of clearing out insurgents, holding territory through combat outposts, engaging and aligning with the sheikhs, and building local Iraqi police units drawn from those tribes had shifted the ground in Anbar. And when fused with what Ali Hatim Abd al-Razzaq Ali al-Sulayman, the paramount sheikh of the Dulaym confederation, called "the Awakening Revolution," the conditions were set to bring the insurgency that AQI had commandeered in 2005 to heel in 2007.[118]

Several accounts have characterized the Sunni Awakening as a sudden "flipping" of the sheikhs from one side to the other, and a

[117] Ibid., 36.

[118] Sheikh Ali Hatim Abd al-Razzaq Ali al-Sulayman, oral history interview conducted by Gary Montgomery and Tim McWilliams for the U.S. Marine Corps History Division, February 15, 2009, transcript, 2.

standalone process. But what this study found was just the opposite. The Awakening was a process that began at the end of 2005 and in 2006 passed through two phases. The first was the ill-fated effort in the early winter months that was snuffed out by AQI. The second came in the summer. It took root because of the successful execution of I MEF's operational plan, in particular the linking of tribal engagement with the methodical establishment of combat outposts in the population centers of Anbar. In Topeka, Raleigh, and Denver the forces of I MEF spread the oil spot, securing more and more ground.

The events of 2006 reveal that holding territory is essential in this kind of war. It is the foundation for a successful counterinsurgency strategy. You must be able to secure the ground where the population lives. I MEF's COIN-based operational plan cleared the insurgents out of the populated areas and then secured that territory through combat outposts. In doing this, it demonstrated to the people of Anbar that engagement was for real.

Territory is as important in counterinsurgency as it is in conventional operations, but for different reasons. In COIN, taking territory constrains the enemy's freedom of movement and gives the population a safe space to live and work. Once the sheikhs were convinced that I MEF intended to stay the course in Anbar, they opened the door to the support of the population. And that population, in turn, swelled the ranks of the Anbar security forces and delivered a wealth of local intelligence on the whereabouts of the AQI network in the province.

Finally, 2006 demonstrated that the tipping point in counterinsurgency is not always self-evident. The year had been an increasingly violent one in Anbar, as the statistics demonstrate. Understanding what that escalating violence signaled proved extremely tricky. Some assessments declaring Anbar lost were far off the mark. In 2007, II MEF replaced I MEF. They saw the situation quite differently. It offered opportunity, and they intended to capitalize on the tipping point that had been reached in 2006. II MEF planned to "cash in," consolidating the gains made by I MEF.

Discussion Questions

1. What effect does a stable, settled population have on developing COIN oil spots?
2. What are the barriers to developing a "permanent force" in an area with a strong history of invasion and conflict? What are the risks and rewards of this strategy?
3. Can "clear, hold, build" work in already unstable regions? If so, how? What adaptations are needed, and what are the risks and rewards?
4. This case study presents the USMC perspective on a bigger story, which leads to a larger set of questions. The most controversial of these is: What explains the success in Anbar? Some of the issues that should be discussed include:
5. Was the tipping point in Anbar initiated by the tribal Awakening Movement, the Marines, or something else?
6. What was the role of Task Force 145 (see Section VI) and their targeted killing of al-Qaeda operatives in Anbar?
7. What was the role of individuals in taking advantage of changing dynamics? Was there a single tipping point, or did several events set the conditions for success?
8. What does this discussion on success teach us about other insurgencies?
9. As outsiders in a culture, can we recognize and exploit the tipping point before the insurgency does? If not, how can we use local knowledge to improve our chances of success?

VI. Consolidating

In late 2006, II MEF prepared to return to an Anbar province that was in the throes of change. Its leadership understood the gains I MEF had made in 2006, and they intended to piggyback on their strategy to exploit those gains and reach the crossover point, the transition from the kinetic fight to the post-conflict phase of counterinsurgency. But it was hard to plan for when to do this and how long it would take.

Maj. Gen. Walt Gaskin, the commanding general of II MEF (Forward), did not have his command prepare a new campaign plan for 2007. I MEF "had [established] a tremendous foundation" to build on, he explained. "I took his [Gen. Zilmer's] campaign plan and I developed it."[119] This included "the tribal engagement part." That was essential if II MEF was going to "in a COIN sense—counterinsurgency sense—separate Al Qaida … from the population centers."[120]

Tribal engagement was the key for building on what I MEF had accomplished. Consequently, that necessitated a keen understanding of the tribes of Anbar. In II MEF's "workup" for Anbar, then-Brig. Gen. John Allen was tasked by Gen. Gaskin with "putting together a PME [professional military education] program on tribal engagement, the history of Mesopotamia and Iraq into modern times and, in particular, about what we termed the human terrain in Anbar Province."[121]

As part of this organizational learning, II MEF brought to Camp Lejeune numerous specialists on these matters with much experience on the ground in the Arab world and with tribal societies. All of this was geared to prepare Marines to be able to work "inside the tribes," to "penetrate the tribal membrane," said Allen.[122] And that was

[119] Maj. Gen. Walter Gaskin, oral history interview conducted by Kurtis Wheeler for the U.S. Marine Corps History Division, June 26, 2007, transcript, 3.
[120] Ibid., 1.
[121] Brig. Gen. John Allen, oral history interview conducted by Michael Visconage for the U.S. Marine Corps History Division, June 27, 2007, transcript, 1.
[122] Lt. Gen. John Allen, interview with the author, July 29, 2010.

true not only for officers at the rank of Generals Gaskin and Allen, but also for those junior officers and NCOs of the MEF's companies and platoons. In fact, it was especially critical for the latter because counterinsurgency fights are won or lost by those small units. All of them, said General Allen, had to have an "understanding of tribalism, understanding of the personalities that we were going to face and the whole dynamic of the code of conduct associated with being a member of an Arab tribe … [if] we were going to fully grasp the opportunities in front of us."[123] Tribal engagement had to be facilitated and nurtured. Tribal engagement was not a "happening," but a methodical process that required careful tending to bring to fruition.

A. Line of Attack

II MEFs lines of operations were subdivided between its Ground Force Element (GFE) and Combat Service Support Element (CSSE). The former was commanded by Brig. Gen. Mark Gurganus, while Brig. Gen. Allen was assigned responsibility for the latter.

Gurganus had responsibility for the kinetic fight. To execute it, he deployed two Marine regiments to AO Denver and Raleigh and an Army brigade to AO Topeka. With those forces, he intended to establish security and stability from one end of Anbar to the other. He also had responsibility for training the Iraqi security forces, expanding their ranks to be able hold the ground once it was cleared of insurgents. As commander of the Combat Service Support Element, Gen. Allen had responsibility for an array of non-kinetic missions that included governance, economic development and rule of law.

Moreover, Allen had responsibility for "tribal engagement," which he described as "the critical enabler within and around all the Lines of Operation."[124] Neither Gurganus nor Allen could successfully

[123] Brig. Gen. John Allen, oral history interview conducted by Tim McWilliams for the U.S. Marine Corps History Division, April 23, 2009, transcript, 12.

[124] Lt. Gen. John Allen, "Anbar Dawn," 5.

prosecute their lines of operations without it. Tribal engagement was the key to everything II MEF hoped to achieve in 2007. [125]

While II MEF did plan and execute across these kinetic and non-kinetic lines of operations, and while it is the case that they were in mutual support of each other, they did have to be implemented sequentially. For the non-kinetic lines of operations to have the desired effect, it was first necessary to use firepower and maneuvers to attack enemy strongholds, drive them out, and then hold that ground after it was cleared. This was the kinetic part of counterinsurgency operations, and it established the security that set the table for the non-kinetic LOOs. This was the line of attack taken by II MEF in 2007.

B. Consolidating Security in Topeka, Raleigh, and Denver

When II MEF deployed to Anbar, plenty of violence awaited it. The *weekly* average number of attacks for the province in January was 400.[126] Each of Anbar's AO's still teemed with AQI fighters, and Gen. Gurganus, in conjunction with his three battlespace regimental and brigade commanders, focused on driving them out and then securing that ground. What follows is a brief recounting of those operations.

AO Topeka: Ramadi

When Col. John Charlton took the 1st Brigade Combat Team (BCT) of the Army's 3rd Infantry Division to AO Topeka in February 2007, he knew the numbers. The BCT he was replacing had been there "eight months and lost 80 Soldiers and Marines," he recalled. "We were going to be there for at least a year and we found out later that it was going to extend to 15 months. So, I knew that there was no way we could sustain that [casualty rate] … we had to do something dramatic … otherwise we would die from 1,000 cuts."[127]

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[125] Ibid.

[126] Maj. Gen. W. E. Gaskin, Commanding General, II MEF (Forward), "Stability in Al Anbar," PowerPoint presentation detailing how II MEF prepared for and operated in Anbar during its deployment.

[127] Col. John Charlton, U.S. Army , interview conducted by the Contemporary Operations Study Team, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, December 9, 2009, transcript, 6.

The colonel decided to clear AQI out of Ramadi *en masse* and take control of the city. The Ready First had made a "penetration, they had established a foothold" in Ramadi, noted Charlton. "The next logical step was to pour everything in there because we had the conditions set to do that. We had a nascent relationship now with the tribal leaders and that led to their greater support for the ISF. So, from a tactical standpoint, we were postured well."[128]

Col. Charlton planned a six-week campaign consisting of several operations to take hold of different parts of Ramadi. The first of these took place in the southeastern part of the city, known locally as the Ma'laab District. The techniques used here were repeated in subsequent operations. They mirrored, said the colonel, "the "clear, hold, build paradigm … You have to do a physical separation of the population from the enemy and you do that through clearing … going house to house, street by street, and clearing the enemy out."[129]

Having cleared, it was time to hold the Ma'laab, to secure that separation of the population from AQI. To do so, Charlton's men started establishing COPs. The first combat outpost was set up in 48 hours. He described the process as a "COP in a box, a pre-fabricated fighting position made out of steel and ballistic glass. We had trucks that were all packaged with these things and once we seized a building, we could have a fully functional combat outpost within about 48 hours. We had engineers standing by to go in there and establish power and wire the place up so you had lights and generators and radios."[130]

And once the COP had secured the area, its forces began interacting with the local population to gain their support. They did so by providing humanitarian assistance, including blankets, generators, food and potable water, and medical support. They even distributed damage payments to begin the rebuilding process. The end result was that in three weeks the operation eliminated insurgent safe havens, established security in the Ma'laab, empowered the Iraqi Police and local government legitimacy, and established public works projects.

[128] Ibid.
[129] Ibid.
[130] Ibid.

The 1st BCT repeated this elsewhere in Ramadi with the same results. By March 30, the city was cleared. On that day Charlton surveyed it from end to end and found it "quiet." It was, he exclaimed, "unbelievable … There was not one single attack in my entire AO, to include downtown Ramadi."[131] AQI had lost Ramadi in just six weeks. Charlton's men established 40 platoon- and company-sized joint security stations, combat outposts, and checkpoints throughout the city. And by the summer, he said, "You could safely go virtually anywhere in the city."[132]

AO Raleigh: Fallujah

The situation in AO Raleigh when RCT-7 commander Col. Richard Simcock arrived was slipping backward, however. His mission was to tackle the dogged insurgent attacks taking place in his AO, starting with parts of Fallujah. Simcock intended to employ the same tactics being used in Ramadi by Lt. Col. Bill Jurney, whose Marine battalion was sweeping insurgents out of the city one block at a time, establishing the conditions for "COPs in a box."

In Fallujah, Simcock's 2/6 battalion did the same thing. By the end of the spring, neighborhoods that 2/6 Marines had been unable to enter without getting into a gunfight in the winter months were now quiet. Other parts of AO Raleigh also had some real hot spots that the battalions of RCT-7 had to pacify. They followed the same blueprint, connecting the clear-hold-build dots. In other words, where AQI once roamed freely and with impunity, the Marines forces established a permanent and persistent presence there. And once the local population felt secure, they established a neighborhood watch and the tips on AQI whereabouts rolled in.

By June major kinetic operations were over in AO Raleigh, said the executive officer (XO) of RCT-7. They were "largely done." The mission was now to transfer control to Iraqi security forces, training their police and army to assume control. And that took time, he

[131] Ibid.
[132] Ibid., 11.

added.[133] But RCT-7 could only get to that point by clearing, holding, and establishing permanent presence. It was a point that Col. Simcock underscored. Through "permanent presence the people know that you're there to stay, you build those relationships, they start talking to you, and it just all rolls in your favor."[134]

AO Denver

Finally, in AO Denver, RCT-2 initiated a series of operations to consolidate the security gains made there in 2006 to move into the non-kinetic stages of counterinsurgency. By the fall of 2007 these security consolidating operations, particularly in the Al Qa'im area, made possible the handoff of multiple RCT-2 fixed positions to ISF, increasing ISF's responsibility and visibility with the populace.

C. Counterterrorism Operations

Implementing counterinsurgency was II MEF's main effort in Anbar. As illustrated above, this entailed taking control of the ground in the province by spreading that COIN oil spot, and then consolidating those gains through tribal engagement. But there was a natural complement to those counterinsurgency and tribal engagement operations, the counterterrorist program carried out by the special mission units of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC).

While COIN and tribal engagement isolated the population from AQI and established local protection and security, they did not eliminate AQI's secret apparatus. Those surreptitious capabilities provided AQI with a broad assortment of means to conduct irregular warfare in Anbar and elsewhere in Iraq. That highly clandestine network, which was composed of a complex array of operational, command, and support units, was generally beyond the reach of MEF forces and their tribal counterparts.[135]

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[133] Lt. Col. John Reeve, oral history interview conducted by Michael Sears for the U.S. Marine Corps History Division, June 9, 2007, transcript, 4.
[134]Col. Richard Simcock, oral history interview conducted by Michael Sears for the U.S. Marine Corps History Division, July 9, 2007, transcript, 10.
[135] This concept of describing an insurgent infrastructure as a clandestine iceberg-like structure, consisting of a complex and secretive array of below-

To disrupt and degrade AQI's secret infrastructure in Anbar, the U.S. employed a clandestine organization—Task Force 145—that likewise operated in the shadows and consisted of highly trained special mission units. Their forte was offensive and highly lethal counterterrorism measures directly targeted at the enemy's clandestine apparatus. This was the third dimension of strategy implemented by the Marines in Anbar beginning in 2006.

In Iraq, that high-speed outfit was put together by Lt. Gen. Stan McChrystal, who had spent a good part of his Army career in the special mission units of JSOC. He commanded JSOC and deployed with units to Iraq from September 2003 until June 2008. Once there, he built a special task force made up of the Army's Delta Force, Navy SEAL Team 6, the Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, elements of the the 75th Ranger Regiment, and the 24th Special Tactics Squadron of the Air Force. Additionally, men from the Britain Special Air Service (SAS) were part of this team, which came to be known as Task Force 145.

In Iraq, Task Force 145 was located at Balad, a Saddam-era airbase 68 kilometers north of Baghdad. McChrystal had it up and running by June 2004. In putting it together, McChrystal started with the premise that he needed a networked organization to defeat the al Qaeda network in Iraq. This was because terrorist groups like AQ had shifted from formally organized hierarchical systems to flexible, decentralized network structures of loosely connected individuals and subgroups that operated with considerable tactical independence. The Balad facility included a state-of-the-art joint operations center (JOC), whose daily activities were directed by the commander of Delta Force. Task Force 145 was subdivided into geographically targeted units: Task Force West was assigned to the greater Anbar area; the Baghdad area was assigned to Task Force Central; Task Force North focused on the Kurdish region; the SAS men of Task Force Black were in the south of Iraq.

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the-waterline operational, command, and support units comes from Roy Godson and the work of the National Strategy Information Center. See their DVD, *Adapting the Paradigm*, http://www.strategycenter.org/.

Task Force 145's operational tempo, set by McChrystal, was to "hit them every night." And that resulted in the elimination of a large number of AQI's mid-level managers who ran the operational, command, and support units. How many did they remove? In the covert world of outfits like Task Force 145, such numbers are hard to come by. But in his book *Task Force Black*, the story of the British SAS element assigned to McChrystal, the well-connected journalist Mark Urban provides some startling figures. If he is to be believed, 145 became an AQI killing machine. "Between 2005 and early 2007," he reports, Task Force 145 "killed two thousand members of the Sunni jihadist groups as well as detaining many more." [136]

D. Expanding ISF

In addition to the kinetic fight against the insurgents, Gen. Gurganus had responsibility for training the Iraqi security forces. Expanding their ranks was essential for holding the ground cleared of AQI and its local counterparts by his Marine regiments and Army brigade.

But to accomplish that objective—growing the police and changing the composition of the army units in the province—tribal engagement was indispensable. "What I soon discovered," said Gaskin, "is that there is a direct correlation between tribal engagement and recruiting. So that ability to connect the tribes with the cause that both of us had in common, getting rid of al Qaeda, and connecting them with their government, meant that they needed to be participants in that, both from a government standpoint, as well as from the military and police standpoint."[137]

That engagement policy, which was launched at the end of 2005 and expanded during 2006, came to fruition in 2007. The significant growth of the police and Iraqi Army in Anbar in 2007 is evidence of it. As the numbers illustrate, the size of Iraqi police in Anbar grew from approximately 9,000 in December 2006 to roughly

[136] Mark Urban, *Task Force Black* (London: Little, Brown, 2010), 243.
[137] Ibid.

25,000 a year later. This increase gave II MEF the capacity to dominate the physical and human terrain of the province.[138]

E. The Centrality of Engagement

To be successful in Anbar, the Marines had to be able to engage the tribal leaders of the province on their terms. And that involved developing a strategy that reflected a sound grasp of Bedouin tribal traditions, Islamic principles, and Arab cultural values. I MEF in 2006 and II MEF the following year embedded that knowledge in their shared campaign plan. This was indispensable because engagement is a strategic tool in an irregular war .

Engagement was the key facilitator to solidifying security. Gen. Gurganus could not have consolidated the gains of his forces without it. The sheikhs provided the men to fill out the ranks of the police and army, which was a prerequisite for holding territory and denying it to the insurgents. It provided the force multiplier needed to win the kinetic fight, and it brought that fight to an end much more quickly than II MEF had anticipated.

Engagement was equally vital in facilitating the initiation of the post-conflict phase of the war. Each of the non-kinetic lines of operation was dependent on buy-in from the tribal leadership and their willingness to take part in the governance process.

Once in Anbar, Gen. Allen moved to expand tribal engagement. The first thing he did was make it a separate line of operation within II MEF. It had been part of governance but Allen realized that, since engagement was going to be central to everything II MEF hoped to accomplish, it needed to be separated from governance. This proved to be an astute decision both for the kinetic fight and for managing the initial phase of the post-conflict period.

[138] Maj. Gen. W. E. Gaskin, Commanding General, II MEF (Forward), "Stability in Al Anbar," PowerPoint presentation detailing how II MEF prepared for and operated in Anbar during its deployment.

F. Post-Conflict Crossover

According to the counterinsurgency classics, insurgencies can take considerable time and effort to degrade and neutralize. This is especially true once the insurgents have embeded their secret, below-the-waterline operational, command, and support units within the population. Rooting them out is an arduous and lengthy process. Insurgencies are protracted struggles—long and drawn-out affairs, not easily reversed.

Consequently, when II MEF deployed to Anbar in early 2007, it expected no immediate drop-off in insurgent violence. The situation it inherited from I MEF was improving but gave little hint that it would dissipate quickly. No imminent reversal was expected.

But such a turnaround is exactly what transpired, and it happened abruptly. In the week of January 19, 2007, just as II MEF was arriving, nearly 450 enemy actions took place in the province. But four months later, that number had dropped to roughly 150 incidents. And by the beginning of July, it was less than 100, and stayed there through mid-September, with a low of just over 50 the first week of August, and again in early September.

"It was a striking drop-off," said Gen. Allen. "Within 90 days of coming over here, virtually the entire situation turned around."[139] It took II MEF by surprise. However, Allen explained, "While we hadn't planned specifically for it [the sharp drop-off in violence], what we did plan for was to recognize it."[140] What he meant by this was that II MEF's intelligence shop was looking for indicators that might signal change was coming and to capitalize on it. And in March, one of those indicators appeared. "Sometime around March we had a meeting … where Sheikh Sattar and the Awakening sheikhs were going to meet with the governor. They were going to meet with the governor and begin to talk about … giving the Awakening additional seating on the provincial council."[141]

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[139] Brig. Gen. John Allen, oral history interview, June 27, 2007, transcript, 5.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid.

At the end of that session, one of II MEF's liaison officers took Allen aside and said to him, "I want you to listen to what I'm going to say because I think this is pretty important." He then asked the general if he realized that during the "meeting there was never any conversation about security or fighting? The entire conversation was about post-conflict power sharing and economic development. These guys are entering their post-conflict period right now," said the liaison officers. The intelligence officers for II MEF came to the same conclusion—"things were profoundly changing." [142] Then in May came the sharp drop-off in violence.

The crossover point from the kinetic fight to the post-conflict phase of COIN came up quickly. The insurgency in Anbar was not conforming to the COIN classics. Once more, war—in this case irregular war—proved to be unpredictable. For II MEF, this presented a strategic opportunity. The forces of Gen. Gurganus had achieved their missions, and it was now time to consolidate those gains. II MEF had been organized for this moment, for that crossover from conflict to post-conflict. Having learned from I MEF and prepared for change, they were able to capitalize on that opportunity.

G. From Armed Struggle to Political Competition

The transition from kinetic operations to governance, reconstruction, and rule of law transpired without much warning in the late spring. To manage that changeover required a broader array of capabilities than those employed in counterinsurgency's "clear and hold" phases. II MEF now confronted the challenges of COIN's "build" period. It had prepared to capitalize on these new conditions in Anbar to jumpstart post-conflict activities and manage the transition opportunity that appeared in the late spring with the dramatic decline in enemy violence. It is important to note, however, that its role was a limited one. II MEF could begin the build process, but seeing the process through to completion was beyond its responsibility and capacity.

[142] Ibid.

It is beyond the scope of this study to go into all the specifics of the post-conflict activities initiated by II MEF. Suffice it to note that by the time they turned over command to I MEF in the early spring of 2008, the situation in Anbar had undergone a remarkable metamorphosis. Consequently, for I MEF the focus in 2008 was on (1) completing the professionalization of the Iraqi Security Forces and handing off the security mission to them; (2) advancing those non-kinetic lines of operations that foster reconstruction, economic development, and the ascendance of the rule of law; (3) turning over responsibility for advancing the post-conflict agenda to I MEF's civilian agency counterparts; and (4) exiting Anbar.

The goal, said Maj. Gen. John Kelly, commander of I MEF, was to build on what II MEF had accomplished the previous year and "accelerate the situation toward normalcy."[143] By the end of 2008, Kelly believed that Anbar had reached that point. Violent actions "were down to, at the most, eight or nine a week." And that number "held for the last five, six months" of the year."[144] Moreover, I MEF continued the "build" process that II MEF started. But while the Marines could initiate this phase, once it was underway the civilian agencies had to develop the means to take control of it and bring it to completion.

Discussion Questions

1. For the oil spot strategy to be successful, a certain level of trust by the local population is needed. What issues might interfere with establishing this trust?
2. Transitioning between the clearing and the holding phase can be fraught with difficulties. One of those is the question of who should stay once the clearing has taken place.

[143] Maj. Gen. John Kelly, presentation at Fletcher School (Tufts University) roundtable, "Marine Generals Discuss Anbar 2006," May 2, 2010, http://www.fletcher.tufts.edu/issp/Video.shtml
[144] Ibid.

3. Is it ideal to use the clearing force as the holding force? If the clearing phase saw extensive civilian casualties, how might that affect the locals' view of the holding force and their support of the insurgents?
4. What are the alternatives? (See CIWAG case study *An Operator's Guide to Human Terrain Teams* by Norman Nigh.)
5. A second issue is timing and resources: How soon after a clearing operation should the holding and building begin? Does speed matter? Why?
6. Defeating an insurgency usually requires a political solution. Was there a political aspect to the defeat of the insurgency in Anbar?
7. How would the Marines' gains have been possible without the previous counterterrorism operations?
8. Does COIN pose a greater threat to insurgents than counterterrorism (CT) operations?
9. Under what circumstances might it be important to use one without the other?
10. What are the risks of carrying out CT operations in the same area where you plan to carry out COIN operations?
11. Counterinsurgency operations are extremely labor-intensive, which raises several operational and strategic questions.
12. How does the risk involved, the commitment of soldiers and resources, and the slow progress that is difficult to quantify, all create strategic and operational pressures on unit- and company-level commanders?
13. How can commanders make the most use of their forces and equipment in a similar operation if restrictions are placed on people and resources?
14. What is the role of time and timing in COIN operations?

VII. Reflections and Lessons from the Anbar Campaign

What the Marine Corps achieved in Anbar constituted a major turning point in the Iraq War. Many had declared the fight there lost at the very time I MEF was launching a three-dimensional strategy in 2006 that culminated in 2007 with a strategic defeat for AQI and those insurgents aligned with it. And that triumph took place before the Surge and the counterinsurgency strategy upon which it was based.

Like the Surge, the Marine campaign plan for 2006 was based on counterinsurgency principles, adapted for the Anbar context. And those precepts were applied across the province before *FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency*, which served as the strategic basis for the Surge, was officially released in December 2006. By then, I MEF was on its way to degrading AQI in Anbar.

In February 2007, Gen. David Petraeus succeeded Gen. George Casey in Iraq. He intended to use the Surge forces as part of a new strategy based on *FM 3-24*. By the time he took command in February 2007, the execution of I MEF's COIN-based plan, now being advanced by II MEF, was reaching the crossover point in Anbar. By the late spring the level of violence fell precipitously, and shortly thereafter II MEF started the transition to an emphasis on non-kinetic operations.

The fight for Anbar Province demonstrated the Marine Corps's capacity to learn and change in order to address complicated and very violent challenges. The Marine Corps once more proved that it possessed this aptitude and that they were up to the task.

The four-year fight in the Sunni heartland is an important illustration of that Marine capacity to improvise and adapt, which is infused into the Corps training routines and warrior ethos. As discussed earlier, Marines are taught to be prepared to rise above those unexpected obstacles always present in combat—what the military theorist Carl von Clausewitz called the fog of war.

Recall that, as Richard Downie noted, military organizations that learn and adapt are ones flexible enough to "use new knowledge or

understanding gained from experience or study to adjust institutional norms, doctrine and procedures in ways designed to minimize previous gaps in performance and maximize future successes."[145] An essential ingredient in that capacity to learn is "institutional memory." It sustains "behaviors, mental maps, norms, and values over time."[146]

The Corps has an organizational culture that is consistent with the learning course of action outlined by Downie. That culture embeds in Marines a method of operating that embraces learning and memory. Its history is rife with examples of Marines at first being caught in the fog of war. But then, having learned from knowledge gained in the fight, the Corps shows itself to be flexible enough to make adjustments, overcome gaps in performance, and succeed. The Marine Corps has demonstrated this adroitness at embracing change at various points in its history.

The campaign in Anbar illustrates these enduring cultural norms of learning, memory, and adaptability. In 2004, I MEF found itself in the fog of war. While it prepared for deployment by studying past experiences in the small wars fought from 1900 through the early 1930s, as well as by examining COIN practices in Vietnam, the situation in the Sunni heartland was not what they expected.[147]

I MEF was not ready for the kind of insurgency emerging in Anbar and, subsequently, suffered ugly surprises. The operational plan was not able to survive first contact, and considerable time was spent, to paraphrase Gen. Kelly, trying to figure out whether or not those guys trying to kill Marines had turned into an insurgency. I MEF lacked local intelligence necessary to produce a full profile of the enemy.

The situation in Anbar became increasingly violent in 2005 as al Qaeda made Iraq the main front, the forward edge of the global battle with the U.S. In doing so, it pulled out all the stops to inflict a defeat of strategic proportions on America. But at the same time, the Marines were learning and gaining ground knowledge from that fight.

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[145] Richard Downie, *Learning from Conflict: The U.S. Military in Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Drug War* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1998), 22.
[146] Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, 6–7.
[147] See *Small Wars Manual: United States Marine Corps 1940* (Manhattan, Kansas: Sunflower University Press, 1996).

That knowledge of the conflict was plowed into the development of I MEF's 2006 campaign plan. This study details how I MEF designed and implemented a counterinsurgency approach that was contextualized for Anbar, consisting of (1) the COIN phases of "clear, hold, build"; (2) tribal engagement to expand the operating force available to maintain local security; and (3) targeted counterterrorism aimed at degrading al Qaeda's clandestine apparatus. These three dimensions of the campaign plan were all critical to the Marine success in Anbar. That COIN strategy, implemented by I and II MEFs in 2006–2007, culminated by the end of 2008 in Gen. Kelly's pronouncement that it was now "appropriate to use the term *victory* in Anbar."[148] In achieving that state of affairs, the Marines were well served by their organizational culture.

A decade into the twenty-first century reveals that the conflict in Iraq is not an anachronism. A persistent and prevalent pattern of irregular conflict has emerged, and the trend is here to stay for the foreseeable future. The conditions that lead to and foster irregular conflicts in various parts of the world— conditions found in weak and failing states—are not easily reversed. Over half the world's states are weak, failing, or failed, and are unable to control their territory, maintain a monopoly over the use of force, or perform core functions. These situations provide opportunities for armed groups to pursue their objectives from the local, to the regional, and even to the global level, often causing major geopolitical damage.

Therefore, the lessons from Anbar are not unique to that four-year battle, and they are not only for the Marines to study. Given the persistence of irregular conflict challenges, those lessons will likely have an enduring applicability in the years ahead for all U.S. military and civilian security institutions. Therefore, they should be assiduously examined, dissected, and, where appropriate, institutionalized into training, organization, and preparation for future irregular challenges.

[148] Maj. Gen. John Kelly, presentation at Fletcher School (Tufts University) roundtable, "Marine Generals Discuss Anbar 2006," May 2, 2010, http://www.fletcher.tufts.edu/issp/Video.shtml.

Here closing reflections are offered, drawn from the narrative. They are presented as ten informed observations taken from the Anbar campaign that relate to the future irregular conflict environment and to the efficacy of counterinsurgency, engagement, and counterterrorism as instruments for managing these future challenges.

Table 1: Lessons from Anbar

The case of Anbar illustrates population-centric warfare, and it should foster insitutional changes in how Marines and other armed servies approach these operations.

1. There is no one-size-fits-all plan to respond to population-centric warfare. All plans have to be contextualized for the specific environment.

2. Contextualizing requires a deep cultural understanding of the local population—how they perceive and think about their world, how they organize social and political relations.

3. Armed groups are complex and diverse. New frameworks need to be conceptualized that can provide detailed knowledge about their organizational and operational capabilities.

4. There is no "COIN in a box." COIN principles mst be customized for the context in which irregular warfare takes place.

5. Counterterrorism operations will continue to serve as an important complement to counterinsurgency operations.

6. Future counterinsurgency success will require military and political advisors who can take a hands-on approach. Their effective mediation will help shape the orientation and conduct of diverse local leaders and communities.

7. Holding territory in irregular conflicts once it is cleared requires indigenous police forces, and this must be facilitated by engagement.

8. Successful COIN campaigns require effective methods for amassing and disseminating timely and accurate local intelligence.

9. The transition from kinetic operations to post-conflict governance, reconstruction, and rule of law is a critical period. Post-conflict operations must be taken over by the appropriate civilian agencies, not continued by the military services.

10. The unexpected will always be present in the fight, and the unforseen will always be a challenge. COIN planners and commanders must expect surprises and be able to adapt quickly when unprepared-for events occur.

First, Anbar is an illustration of population-centric warfare, and it should foster institutional changes in how Marines and the other armed services approach these operations. New concepts and capabilities are needed to manage these irregular fights, as the Anbar campaign displayed. Moreover, there is no one-size-fits-all in responding to population-centric warfare. The operational concepts for succeeding in Anbar were anchored in counterinsurgency doctrine. But the COIN plan had to be contextualized for that environment.

Second, to be able to contextualize necessitates deep cultural understanding of the local population, how the people perceive and think about their world, and the ways in which they organize social and political relations to survive in it. Without this understanding, it will be impossible to successfully prosecute future population-centric conflicts. In Anbar, this took time to attain. To succeed, the Marines had to be able to engage the Sunni tribes and their leaders on their own terms, which called for a sound grasp of Bedouin and Arabic tribal traditions, Islamic principles, and Arab cultural values. This knowledge came to

serve as the foundation upon which to build a tribal engagement strategy. I MEF in 2006 and II MEF the following year embedded that knowledge in their shared campaign plan.

Third, armed groups are complex and diverse actors not easily discerned or figured out. To know this kind of enemy, who will surely be present in future irregular conflicts, Marines and soldiers will require new methods for profiling the organizational and operational capabilities of these diverse non-state actors. New frameworks need to be conceptualized to provide commanders with detailed knowledge that encompasses the key characteristics of armed groups. By gaining understanding of these characteristics, comprehensive depictions can be generated and assembled. In Anbar, armed groups comprising the insurgency consisted of several clandestine organizations. And the most sophisticated of them—AQI—maintained a secret infrastructure with sub-units that included intelligence and counterintelligence capabilities, as well as fighting, financial, logistical, and communications units.

Fourth, COIN will have a place in future irregular conflicts where the objective is to influence and secure the population. Adopting a counterinsurgency strategy based on the standard COIN tenets of clear-hold-build-transfer and spreading that oil spot was very effective in Anbar. But how COIN is applied in the future cannot follow a cookie-cutter approach. There is no "COIN in a box," no blueprint to take off the shelf and implement. COIN principles must be customized for the context in which irregular war takes place. Those old counterinsurgency classics and *FM 3-24* can take you only so far; they provide a framework but not a blueprint. Future counterinsurgency operations will have to be tailored to the fight.

Fifth, while the new counterinsurgency literature devotes considerable attention to non-kinetic lines of operations with an emphasis on civil agencies carrying out humanitarian and developmental activities, COIN in Anbar was still war, and it still involved combat. Success in Anbar began with Marine and Army units sweeping the insurgents from the cities and towns spread along the Euphrates from Fallujah to the Syrian border. They used firepower and maneuvers to attack enemy strongholds, drive the insurgents out, and hold that ground after it was cleared. And they were not the only forces

carrying out combat operations in Anbar; special mission units comprised of JSOC operators were also on the ground. While the MEF's force isolated the population from AQI, it did not eliminate its clandestine or secret underground. But JSOC units did by directly targeting the personnel that populated AQI's clandestine apparatus. In the future, counterterrorism operations will continue to serve as an important complement to counterinsurgency campaigns.

Sixth, to execute successful counterinsurgency programs in future conflict environments, the U.S. will need military and political advisors who can take a hands-on approach and, through effective mediation, help shape the orientation and conduct of diverse local leaders and communities. Such advisors must be able to foster constructive interaction and cooperation in conflict and post-conflict settings where power is characteristically personalized and factionalized. An examination of successful counterinsurgency efforts in the past demonstrates that individuals with these skills have often played key roles. And this narrative illustrates how the Marines and their Army counterparts in Anbar began to develop this advisory capability, not by design but through on-the-job learning. And when it became apparent how important it was to managing the conflict, II MEF initiated a training effort to instill advisory skills in officers and NCOs down to the company and platoon levels.

Seven, holding territory in irregular conflicts once it is cleared requires indigenous police forces. All the COIN classics stress that indigenous police are a key counterinsurgency capability. This again proved to be the case in Anbar. The key to holding territory was the expansion of Iraqi security forces, especially the police, for they provided a persistent presence within the local population. Al Qaeda also understood the importance of indigenous police and the dangers they posed to its hold on the province. If the ranks of the police came to be filled with local tribesmen, they would no longer be able to hide in plain sight and would soon be out of business. But increasing the size of the police as a part of COIN strategy cannot take place in a vacuum. It has to be facilitated by engagement, as can be seen in the Anbar experience.

Eight, successful COIN campaigns require effective methods for amassing and disseminating timely and accurate local intelligence. That COIN is an intelligence-led fight is one of those other maxims found in both classic and current counterinsurgency doctrine. Closely connected to this intelligence requirement are two other COIN prerequisites discussed above: a physical presence capable of holding territory and a strong indigenous police force. In Anbar, these three COIN requirements were symbiotically connected. Clearing and holding of territory fostered the expansion of police forces, which made possible collection of the local intelligence needed to expose AQI's underground organization. No longer could AQI members hide among the population. To further exploit this opportunity, II MEF in 2007 fostered the formation of special police intelligence units that enhanced the capacity of the Anbar police to roll up AQI.

Nine, the transition from kinetic operations to post-conflict governance, reconstruction, and rule of law is a critical juncture in all counterinsurgency campaigns. Once it begins, managing COIN's build period requires a broader array of capabilities than those employed in the clear-and-hold phases. II MEF was ready for that changeover in 2007. It had organized to jumpstart the processes of governance, economic development, and rule of law. And it did so effectively, but within limitations. II MEF's role was a restricted one: it was able to get the "build" process started, but the completion of that process was beyond its responsibility and capabilities. An important lesson from the Anbar campaign is that post-conflict operations, whether they are a part of counterinsurgency missions or of other contingencies, are not the primary responsibility of the military services. While the U.S. military can help initiate this phase, once it is underway the civilian agencies have to develop the means to take control of it and bring it to completion.

Ten, in counterinsurgency warfare, as with its conventional counterpart, the only constant is that the unexpected will always be present in the fight. The unforeseen will challenge COIN campaign plans. To deal effectively with the unexpected future, COIN planners and commanders must be schooled to expect surprise and be predisposed to adapt when unprepared-for events occur. During the

spring of 2007, the unexpected happened in Anbar, and it happened fast. The fight abruptly changed. When II MEF returned to the province in the beginning of that year, it anticipated no sharp drop-off in insurgent violence any time soon. The conflict had settled into a bloody, protracted struggle and, according to the COIN classics, it would take considerable time to root the insurgents out. But a sea change happened. Within 100 days of arriving, II MEF saw the situation virtually turned on its head as insurgent violence dropped precipitously. The crossover point from the kinetic fight to the post-conflict phase of COIN was not by the book. However, to the credit of II MEF, its planners had prepared to exploit that turn of events. And they did. The result, as Gen. Kelly noted above, was that by the end of 2008 it was "appropriate to use the term *victory* in Anbar."

Discussion Questions

1. Has doctrine changed in the face of this experience? How can we ensure that these lessons will not be lost?
2. Is the entire organization learning these lessons, or select individuals within the organization? How can individual learning be transmitted to the organization as a whole?
3. Would these results have been possible with forces other than the Marines? How can other branches of the military learn from the Marines? Do they need to?

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